Diligo Inimicus

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Diligo Inimicus

by bokunojinsei

Summary

“The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him.”
— G.K. Chesterton

In second century Rome, the Persian empire creeps steadily towards Roman borders, war pressing from a distance. Will is a Roman legionary medic and a pariah among the soldiers. As war looms ever closer, he finds himself forming a unique bond with the captain of the mercenaries who accompany them. The captain's name is Hannibal.

Notes

My first Hannibal fic and I intend to make the most of it. This will be the first fic in a series. I hope you all enjoy it. I'm going to have a lot of fun writing it.

Inspired by this lovely video: https://youtu.be/4cBRlQi2fiQ

This follows the real historical events of the Roman-Persian war around 230 AD. While I try to do as much research as I possibly can, I'm no historian and I'm sure there are plenty of inaccuracies.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mesopotamia: 229 AD/CE

The day was a temperate and dull one, grass stilled by the long-forgotten wind that had abandoned them to cool the faces of the cohorts a journey's way back towards Nicomedia. A young man, ragged brown curls and frustrated grimace, sat atop a stone at the riverside as he tugged off the strips of his lorica segmentata. He frowned at the bits of rusted iron clipped between leather straps and dropped it to the ground at his feet. He would attempt to polish it later. For now, he simply wanted to sit and breathe the still air; to shrug away the drone of constant voices surrounding him.

A moment halted in the chaos.

The peace was short-lived.

"Willhelm, boy!"

The youth grimaced, less obviously now, and moved to untie his greaves. "Will, if you could. Just Will."

There was a snort as one of the soldiers heckling him elbowed another. If they were indicating some sort of inside joke, Will didn't want any part of it.

"What's wrong with Wilhelm?" The soldier was goading now, but Will refused to take the bait.

"Nothing. I prefer Will, thank you."

"Nothing to be ashamed of," the other soldier pitched in. He had his helmet hooked under his arm and was fiddling with the neck guard. "Having a Germanic name."

Will shut his eyes slowly, realizing only then where this was headed. Carefully, he reached for his armor only to be stopped by a bare foot heeling it into the dirt. "Rude to just walk off, Wilhelm."

"Our centurion walks by and my dismissal would end up less concerning to you," Will warned. He tried to put strength in his voice, truly, but the weakness shook in the back of his throat and the other men noticed.

"I had family killed in battles with the Germanic tribes, you know." The soldier with the helmet stuck his nose in the air.

Will frowned and tried to pull his armor out from the preventing foot. "That was nearly two generations back. You couldn't have even met those relatives." He bit his lip, regretting the

words as soon as they left his mouth.

The soldier's face grew red with rage. "What does—"

"Is there an issue with the immunes, Herius?"

All three men shrunk in on themselves, retracting almost immediately from the interaction.

"No, Legatus," Herius replied with a stiff back and low eyes. "Conversation."

Legatus Caeso hummed and stepped close. "Our dear immunes here does not seem to be enjoying your conversation, Herius. Perhaps you should converse elsewhere."

The men needed no further prompting, turning on their heels and trudging irritably back through the brush.

Will rubbed his eyes and finally picked up his armor, shoving it in his lap. "You didn't need to."

Caeso shrugged, full armor still donned and plates clinking over red linen. "Few seem to offer you aid here, Will. Accept it when it's offered."

Will rolled his shoulders and glanced around at the men surrounding the riverside and setting camp. "It's not exactly usual to be so friendly with a lesser rank as Legatus, you know. Even if I am immunes."

"I wasn't always Legatus." Caeso pursed his lips and thinly hid his displeasure. "We enlisted the same damned *week*, Will. We are friends."

Will allowed himself a small chuckle. "Yes, and that friendship gets me into even more trouble, I'll have you know."

"How so?"

"Many think I've submerged myself halfway up your backside to conveniently place myself out of harm's way. They think I don't earn my place."

"Does that bother you?" Caeso regarded him, curious.

Will chewed at his lower lip, considering telling a lie. He chose against it. "Yes. I've got a lot against me, Caeso. You know that. They'll never let those things fall behind us."

"Many haven't battled with you before. They don't know your capabilities."

Will laughed outright this time. "Perhaps that's a good thing. I'm horribly inept in combat."

"I wouldn't go that far." Caeso's smile was teasing. "I'm not speaking of your flourish with a sword, my friend. You have saved more lives than I've taken."

Will ran a hand through the unruly curls that made up the mess flowing over his eyes. He was an immunes; a legionary who specialized in skillsets that awarded unique rank. His own particular skill was in medicine.

He preferred to call it a skill in ignoring death.

That particular skill had served him well over the years in the legion. Will was by no means an able warrior. His body was lean and light. He wasn't suited for heavy shields and hefting pilums across fields. What he was good at was movement. He could dodge, duck, run, and always seemed to have luck just on his side. An arrow would hiss by his ear the moment he turned. A sword would leave nothing but the sound of ringing metal in its wake as it missed his gut by an inch.

It made him a valuable medic on the field. Despite the chaos surrounding him, Will could slip about nearly unnoticed, dragging away the wounded to bandage them up or give them comfort in their final moments.

Most of the men in this century hadn't been in battle with him before. Most of them hadn't been saved by his hand and as such all they saw was his weakness and his name.

Will often found himself resenting his father for his frame and namesake both. His father had been a calm man, content to be nothing more than a farmer with a small smattering of books and letters to keep them company. He had named Will in respect of culture, but Will often cursed the naivety of the choice.

"There, some friendly faces."

Will was startled out of his thoughts by Caeso's announcement and looked up. Sure enough, thumping greaves and smiling faces were upon them.

"You two are glued together more tightly than the slats of Helvetia, here," barked one as he lifted up the shield in question.

"I still don't understand why you named your shield, Tertius," Will answered with a smile. "It's just as ridiculous every time you say it."

"What?" Tertius looked absolutely affronted, a whisper of a grin tugging at his lips. "But my lady has protected me well. She deserves a title worthy of great—"

"Breasts?" The tall man beside him suggested. His name was Cimon and he was a hulking beast of a man with long hair and warm eyes that twinkled as his jest earned the laughter of the soldiers around him.

"Helvetia had wonderful breasts," Tertius agreed, cupping his hands to his chest.

"You'll see her again when it's all said and done." Cimon knew how quickly homesickness could overtake a man in such conditions and moved to placate it. "Not long now."

"We're due out here two years yet before we can return to Rome and you say not long now?" The stocky man behind them snipped.

Cimon threw a threatening look over his shoulder. “Bite your tongue, Lucas, you silly fool.”

Lucas frowned testily and crossed his arms over his breastplate. “Not everyone shares your exuberant optimism, you behemoth.”

There was an outcry and suddenly Lucas was crammed in a headlock underneath Cimon’s arm. Cimon flicked his scalp and simply grinned as Lucas struggled to free himself. “Apologize to our dear Tertius for being so entirely bleak.”

“Let me go!”

“Not until you apologize.”

“No!”

Will was rolling his eyes at the childish display, not bothering to restrain his laugh at Tertius’ exasperated expression.

“You’re both ridiculous,” Tertius grumbled.

Cimon grinned even wider and held Lucas’ head tighter.

“Ah fine! Fine!” Lucas cried out. “Just let me go! You smell like a pit.”

Cimon took pity and released the smaller man, giving him a pointed look. “Well?”

Lucas scowled and rubbed his hand over his shaved head. Poking a thumb to the side of his eyes, he spat out a reply through gritted teeth. “Will you ever be able to forgive me, Tertius, for being so dismally bleak?”

Tertius pressed his hand to his beard as though to consider the offer. When it looked as though Lucas would tackle him any moment, he relented. “Yes, yes, I suppose I can accept such a sincere and unprovoked apology.”

Lucas grumbled under his breath and they all ignored him as he flopped down beside Will and unceremoniously yanked the armor from the smaller man’s lap.

Will was about to object when he realized that Lucas was now busying himself with polishing away the rust that had been kissing the edges of the iron. He shut his mouth. At least Lucas’ grumpy stupor would save him from the chore later on in the day.

He leaned back on his palms for a moment, letting the relief of their company sweep over him. He had known these men for nearly eleven years now, having met them when he was no more than seventeen. He had fought alongside them, bled with them, sewn up their wounds, and they were the few in the world he could breathe comfortably near.

He peered around to look for the two missing from the group, Jove and Valerian, but could spot neither of them nearby. They were likely setting the tents, which was no easy feat.

“Only a few days more and we’ll reach Ancyra, won’t we?” Tertius had snatched an apple from his pack and was using his dagger to carve small slices of the flesh. He looked at Caeso expectantly.

Caeso nodded, watchful eye scanning the troops to keep a lookout for any necessary intervention. The men had been travelling for over a week now. Nerves were fraying. “It’s a city heavy in trade. We’ll be able to resupply there as we need. From there we seek Antioch.”

Will let out a surprised exhale. “Nothing between? No wonder we need to resupply.”

“Our pace was slowed by the incident with the men from before.” Caeso frowned deeply and adjusted his gladius on his hip. “We’ll need to press forward more urgently now.”

“The incident” referred to a group of men the century had encountered on the main road to Ancyra. Bandits.

Dirty and foul men who reeked of piss and alcohol had been pulling apart the satchels of two dead merchants. Upon the sight of the century, they made no effort to run, knowing the worthlessness of trying to escape the eighty men to their ten.

There had been a great deal of debate among the soldiers on whether or not to simply kill the bandits. In the end, the ranking officers had deemed it necessary to take them as prisoners to Ancyra due to the fact that they were, unfortunately, Roman citizens. The city could have them.

Cimon snatched a slice of Tertius’ apple, to which he received no protest. “What of the auxilia? Are we to refit them as well?”

Caeso shook his head. “They fit themselves. I don’t imagine they would accept an extended hand, regardless.”

Their eyes simultaneously dragged over the riverbed and past the men digging trenches at the slope of the hill. There, along a sparse tree line, rest the auxilia—mercenaries. They were made up entirely of foreigners. None of them were Roman and, as such, they kept distance when the lure of a fight remained no more than speculation.

Will couldn’t help but feel an unnecessary guilt. “What if they need supplies?”

Caeso gave him an odd look. “They have more than enough Roman coin lining their pockets to serve them well, I assure you.” There was no small amount of bitterness in his tone. Caeso had been open with his displeasure at having an auxilia assigned to his century, but he was a wise leader and knew the benefit of tactics that expanded the capacity of his own men.

The mercenaries were made up mostly of Persians.

Persians knew how to slice a man.

“Do you speak with their leader, Caeso?” Tertius inquired, tossing the rind of his apple to the earth.

Caeso grunted. “No. A messenger relays information to us. Seems the esteemed captain wishes to keep the line clear between us.”

“No loss,” Lucas grumbled as he scrubbed at Will’s armor. “Never liked Persians.”

“You’ve hardly known any Persians.”

Lucas shrugged. “I’ve known those Persians and if the rest of them are as friendly as that bunch I retain that it is no loss.”

Cimon tapped the side of Lucas’ head, ignoring the shout of indignation. “You know as much about being friendly as they do.”

“Perhaps the leader simply cannot speak to us,” Will suggested. “It may not be insolence.”

“What? His tongue’s been cut out or something equally disgusting?” Tertius looked squeamish at the thought.

Will groaned. “No, he may only speak his own language. It’s not unlikely.”

“It is, actually,” Caeso countered. “I know his face. I’ve seen it on and off the battlefield for years among chains of command. He always keeps to the outside, but seeing him fight is memorable enough to take note in one’s memories. He’s been in Roman territory long enough to learn.”

Will couldn’t disagree. He had seen the man too. Never spoken to him or even been near enough to make out the details between black hair and rich skin, but he had seen him plenty. He had seen him enough to know exactly why Caeso had agreed to let that particular auxilia remain snapped to the side of their cohort.

The man was no person. He was a weapon, entirely.

Will knew that was also the reason no Roman officers made an effort to communicate with him directly. No need to instigate the ire of a Persian who had proven his prowess in more battles than Will had fingers. He may be on their side now, but it was the coin and coin alone that allowed that partnership stability. No one had any desire to strain it.

It was an uneasy but beneficial partnership. Pay them coin, leave them be, and watch them tear apart the enemy like reaping wheat from a field.

“We’ll be in close quarters with them soon.” Will knew the others wouldn’t appreciate him pointing out the fact, but he felt the need to do so nonetheless.

“Why?” Lucas looked entirely oblivious.

“We must pass through Tarsus on our path to Antioch.” Caeso seemed to finally decide on removing his helmet and rubbed at the sweaty red hair sticking to his brow. “Stick against the coast from there. There’s some uneasy terrain there. It will corral us together on the road we must take. We’ll likely camp together on those nights.”

“They’ll slaughter us in our sleep.”

Cimon barked out a laugh. “Then who would pay them?”

Lucas wrinkled his nose and decided to speak to Will instead. “Take care of your damned armor.”

Will had the decency to look vaguely ashamed. “Thank you for cleaning it.”

Lucas simply wrinkled his nose again and shoved the now clean lump of iron back into Will’s lap.

“Do you think they go by titles?”

They all frowned at Tertius’ arbitrary question.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well you were all wondering so much at their captain and I’ve heard him referenced before by his men.” Tertius held his palms up in defeat. “I don’t know if it’s a title or a name. I’m not entirely certain it’s a reference solely to him at all. I think it must be.”

Caeso shifted back and forth on his heels, considering. “I don’t know if they go by titles. I’d assume not, but I don’t claim to be knowledgeable on the matter.”

Will couldn’t restrain his curiosity. “What have you heard? I’m surprised I’ve heard nothing of the sort before, despite all this time.”

Tertius made a face. “They have heavy accents and half the time they are speaking in Persian.”

“Don’t take it back now, Tertius,” Cimon teased. “You’ve titillated us.”

A greave kicked petulantly into the dirt. “Don’t remind me.” Tertius took in a deep sigh and sifted through his memory with an upwards glance to the grey sky. “They refer to him as,” he winced. “Well it sounds like ‘Hanival’. I’ve never heard such a name. It’s why I wondered at the possibility of a title.”

“Could be either,” Caeso agreed. “No way to be sure.”

“Someone could go ask him,” Cimon suggested, canines biting into his lip wolfishly.

“You just want something dramatic to happen,” Caeso accused.

“Absolutely, but it doesn’t detract from the truth of the statement. He’s only a man.”

“Easy for you to say,” Will retorted. “You’re a tower. The rest of us only need one slice to be split in two by his blade.”

“Dear Will.” Cimon placed a large hand over his heart. “You were always the most reasonable of us. Even you have fallen victim to this childish blather?”

“I was never the one to go poking hornet’s nests with sticks, no.” Will raised an eyebrow.

“Oh I was.” Cimon looked proud of himself for the admission. “Makes you stronger to get eaten alive by nature. Let the beast chew you up and spit you back out and you’ll be a better beast for it.”

The silence of the five of them acknowledged the truth of the statement. As whimsical as Cimon had a tendency to be, the man was a fine soldier. There was no denying his strength or fervor on the battlefield. Enemies would flee from him upon witnessing his size alone.

“My only point is that the man seems content for us to leave him be.”

“I do wish you didn’t have such a penchant for ironic statements, Will,” Caeso said with a tense strain. He shoved his helmet back over his head and placed a hard palm on the hilt of his gladius.

Confused, Will followed his gaze to the opposite bank. His eyes caught up before his ears did.

A young legionary was waving about a gladius, red-faced and shouting. Before him loomed a defensive Persian, arms crossed and sneer set deep within his dark features. The Roman’s shouts echoed over the field, then, as though the air had thought only to carry the noise now.

Will couldn’t make out the words, but they were as irate as any he’d heard.

Then, like a shadow melting out from the trees, the mercenary’s captain approached. Will balked and thought of Caeso’s chiding about irony. He remembered distantly of an old man who had spoken to him of summoning devils with words alone.

It made him feel responsible for the demonstration taking place in some strange and disconnected way.

Caeso was halfway across the river now, the water reaching only his thighs as he drew his gladius and prepared to ward off any substantial damage the disagreement could incur.

Will briskly grabbed at his medical sack and tucked it to his side, stumbling when he stood only to trip on unbound greaves. Cursing to himself, he knelt to wrap them up again before moving to follow Caeso. If the dispute went south, he would be needed.

And south it went. Quickly.

Will’s toes had barely touched water before the argument heightened and the foolish Roman charged the man of the auxilia. The Persian moved to draw his sword, but upon a side glance he caught the eye of his captain. The captain shook his head, a minute twitch of movement, and the Persian hesitantly lowered his hand away from his blade.

Will trudged through the water, watching the exchange in confusion. He hastened.

The legionary had no such pause and his gladius connected with a deaf thud to the mercenary's shoulder. For a moment, Will had hoped the sound indicated the fortune of armor, but the hopeful moment passed as the man fell, hand to his breast to staunch the blood there.

Caeso was shouting now and men were circled all around. The legionary froze, horror dawning upon his features as he came to realize that the Legatus himself had come to put a stop to this fight. Will knew the look of a man meeting his fate when he saw it. The legionary looked positively dismantled.

Will turned his attention back to the felled Persian as he reached the bank, holding his pack upward to keep its contents safe from the river. Roman or not, there was an injured man who needed tending to. Will had no intention of feigning ignorance.

He heard the shouts of Caeso in the back of his ears, reprimanding the legionary for his foolishness, but he paid it no mind. Eyebrows knit together in assessment, he knelt next to the man on the ground and reached into his pack for the bottle of boiled water he kept there to rinse out wounds.

He reached hesitantly for the man's shoulder and stopped when the man glared at him through grit teeth. "I don't know if you understand me," he tried. "I only want to help you. I'm a medic." Silence. Desperate, he grabbed a roll of linen bandages from his bag and gestured with them. "I heal?"

The man's eyes skittered upwards and Will followed the gaze, breath nearly knocking out of him when he saw where it was directed. No more than an arm's length away stood the auxilia captain, closer than Will had ever seen him before. His black hair was slipped back from his face and his eyes pierced into Will's own. After a moment, he nodded and simply stood there in wait.

The man beneath him relaxed and Will shook off his surprise as best he could. He had work to do.

As gently as he could manage, he untied the binds of the man's cuirass and slipped it off his shoulder. He wore no tunic beneath and Will marveled at how the man could do so without chafing. He let out a heavy sigh of relief. The wound was entirely superficial, slipping over the collarbone and the meat of the shoulder. This would be simple. Deep, but survivable.

The man would not be able to use his arm for at least two weeks. Will did not want to be the one to bring him such news.

Sucking his lip between his teeth, Will began to work. He avoided the eyes of the Persian in favor of pouring the water over the wound to rinse it clean. Next came vinegar, a method he had learned from a studious doctor two years back. It would help slow the flow of blood and allow Will to work in stitches.

He grabbed his needle kit and laced through fine thread. He frowned and looked from the needle to the man and then back again. "This will not be pleasant." He knew the man could

not understand him, but he felt the need to warn him anyway; perhaps to soothe his own conscience. “I’m sorry for that, but this is far too deep to leave open to the dirt.”

The man made no move to acknowledge him and Will steeled himself. He had sewn up men as they screamed and writhed, but that was on the battlefield. Now that the noise of the argument had died down and the voice of Caeso’s punishment had faded into the distance, only the eerie calm of the auxilia captain and a few straggling observers remained.

There was no adrenaline here and Will prayed the man would not scream.

By the grace of one god or another, the mercenary let off no more than a simple grunt of discomfort as the needle pierced his skin. Will sighed in relief and began to stitch. The wound pulled close stitch by stich—twelve in all—and Will relinquished the kit in favor of the bandage roll. He knew the centurion would be displeased at the use of Roman provisions on the auxilia, but he would concern himself with that later when the sun had fallen and the expected reprimands rung in his ears.

The man was sitting upright now, the shock of the blow having faded from him. He stared off into the distance and showed no sign of gratitude as Will finished wrapping the bandage and sat back on his heels. “Alright.”

The Persian sniffed and stood, regarding his captain before storming back to the mercenary’s camp.

With a heavy breath, Will accepted the actions and began to repack his bag, trying to ignore the remaining presence of the captain to his side. Eventually, curiosity won out and Will broke the silence when he stood. He turned to face the other man, choosing to stare at his forearm and the ink that adorned it rather than the man’s face. He wondered at the meaning of the markings and spoke softly. “Be sure to have him wash it with fresh water. He does not and it will infect. He would lose the arm entirely.”

Will swallowed roughly and turned to go. He wanted to get away from this side of the river. He felt out of place and intruding.

When the captain spoke, the depth of his voice made the hairs on the back of Will’s neck stand on end.

“You have skill.”

Will froze. He could not help the shocked gape of his mouth. Lack of decorum was far from his mind. “You speak.”

The captain smirked, amused. “You thought otherwise?”

Will allowed himself to look upon the other man’s face, then. He rubbed his arms. “I…” he trailed off, feeling utterly foolish. “Some suspected you could not. You never speak to our officers.”

“I find no reason to speak to your officers,” the man replied amiably.

The amicable nature of him confused Will completely. He felt the threads of the conversation slipping away from his fingers. “It was rude of me to presume.”

“Ignorant, perhaps,” the captain amended. “But I have yet to see rudeness accompany your actions.” He looked over his shoulder and then back at Will, meeting his eyes. “You helped one of my men. You did not need to.”

Will fidgeted under the scrutiny. He didn’t like being stared at and being stared at by this man was staggeringly more discomfiting than most. “He was injured. It’s my purpose.”

“It is your title, not your purpose.”

Will could find no reply to that.

The captain seemed to consider him for a moment before sweeping a broad arm back to the tree line. “Come. Allow me to thank you.”

“Forgive me.” Will had every intention of refusing. He was already in trouble for using the medical supplies for the auxilia, he knew. It would do him no good to further the talk by venturing into the militia’s camp. No other legionary had done so in months. The groups simply didn’t socialize. “I’m not—“

“From my observations, many of your comrades have no love for you already.” The captain’s comment stung. “And the few who do should not hold my gratefulness over your head.”

Will decided not to acknowledge the fact that the captain had apparently been observing him. It made the muscles of his back twitch. It was logical that the man would watch the century; be aware of the goings on. “There has been much excitement already today. I wouldn’t wish to cause more.”

The man looked to the heavens as though to seek out patience and gestured towards the trees once more. “Come.” This time, he didn’t wait, simply walking off and leaving Will to decide for himself.

Panicking, Will shot a look back across the river and then to the auxilia captain. If he refused this offer there was no way of knowing how the Persian would take it. He weighed the options heavily in his mind. The wrath of his centurion was inevitable. He didn’t need to inspire the wrath of the auxilia alongside it.

And so he followed.

Will was surprised to find that none of the mercenaries watched him as he walked among them. He had anticipated cold glares or inquisitive glances at the least, but they seemed to accept the decisions of their captain with an apathy earned from utter trust and respect. They did not question him.

The captain himself didn’t look over his shoulder throughout the short journey. Will felt a bubble of irritation in his chest that the man was so certain Will would follow him. Was he truly so predictable or was the man simply that confident in his own methods of persuasion?

They came to a halt amidst trees edging a clearing and the captain abruptly stopped and sat down next to a dwindling fire. Unsure, Will lingered by the trees.

“Come.”

Will’s nose scrunched and he wondered how often the man said that word. A command said with none of the forcefulness of order. It was said with assurance, as though he never even considered to expect disobedience.

In spite of his pride telling him to do otherwise, Will did as he was told and sat next to him. He noticed that none of the militia were near this place. Perhaps this spot was for their commander alone. “You’ve no tents,” he observed.

“No need. We don’t see reason to burden ourselves with weight to slow us.”

“But how do you shelter yourselves from the elements?”

The man picked up a stick and stoked the fire. “The land provides, boy.”

Will ruffled and rubbed at his bare knees. “I’m no boy.” It was a petulant thing to say, but this man had no right to be calling him a boy; captain or no.

Will found himself regarded with a raised brow and a discerning gaze. “No, you’re not. Forgive me.”

“No, no.” Will groaned and slipped his palm through his mussed hair. “Forgive *me*. I’ve intruded upon you and yet I’m acting like a child.”

“I insulted you,” the man replied plainly. He stoked the fire again.

Will was still, watching as the man prodded the embers every now and then and settling into an uneasy silence. He was the guest here and knew better than to question the man’s offer of gratitude, so he waited.

“Your name?”

“I’m sorry?”

Dark eyes met Will’s again. “What is your name? Romans are quite fond of their names, I’ve found.”

Will grimaced and palmed at his knees again. “I have no Roman name. I’m reminded of it quite often.”

“Oh?” The utterance did not press. It was merely a welcome to continue.

“My name is Willhelm. It’s Germanic. My father thought it to be worldly. Others find it to be tasteless.” Will spat the words like a bitter breath.

“My name also does not match my heritage.”

Of all the replies Will had expected, that had not been one. “Truly?”

The man exhaled with humor. “Truly. Though I am of Persia, my name finds history in Carthage.”

“You have a Carthaginian name?” Will mulled over the fact. He had met few people from Carthage. The stories of the land were wondrous and ridiculous. They spoke of massive vessels than skewered the sea with fine woods and the most exotic of goods aboard the decks. A place of islands and oceans. “May I ask what it is?”

“Hannibal.”

Will laughed, remembering what Tertius had said earlier that very afternoon. “Oh, I see.”

Hannibal looked at him in question. “I didn’t know my name would amuse you so.”

Realizing his error, Will quickly retracted his laughter. “Please accept my apologies. A comrade of mine had guessed at your name earlier and I found the truth of it to be in good jest.”

The older man relaxed at the admission. “And what was his guess, I wonder?”

“Hanival.” Will grinned toothily. “Your pronunciation is far more pleasant to the ears.”

Hannibal smiled, then, and said nothing.

Will’s laughter died out and he felt his face flush at the smile he received. He turned back to the fire quickly. “Am I keeping you?”

“From what?”

Will frowned. “What?”

Hannibal chuckled dryly and set the branch in his hand aside, leaning back. “What would you be keeping me from, Willhelm?”

“Will, if you could.” He blurted it out before he could help himself and once again subjected himself to a mental berating for the impulsivity of his own voice. “I’m sorry.”

Hannibal shook his head and smiled again. “As you wish. What would you be keeping me from, Will?”

“I…” Will looked at the other man helplessly. “I don’t know. I suppose I’m trying to find reasons to feel guilty for being here.” He hoped the admittance wouldn’t be taken too harshly.

“Do you wish to leave?”

A lip was pulled between teeth, a nervous habit, and Will looked at the fire once more. “Truly? No, I’d like to stay for a while if it’s of no inconvenience to you.” He had already

solidified the consequences of this by going at all. It would do no further harm to remain for a while longer.

“I had assumed as much. Everyone needs to find peace from the repetition now and again.”

It was then that Will realized Hannibal’s gratitude had already been repaid. In the simple act of allowing the legionary time away from his century, Hannibal had given Will the one thing he had needed in that moment.

Quiet.

Will felt his chest go tight with a thankful hum he could not express. He settled for a soft smile and relaxed shoulders, intending to convey his understanding with those gestures alone. How Hannibal had known this was what Will had craved for weeks on end, there was no true way to be certain. In the brief moments of their interaction the conclusion had been reached and Hannibal had provided. Will shut his eyes and let the warmth of the fire seep into his skin. The smile still hung around his lips.

They sat that way for what felt like an indefinite period of time. The crackle of firewood and screech of evening insects among the trees were the only sounds that permeated the brief and welcome calm of the clearing.

Will picked up the stick between them and began stoking the fire himself, feeling as though he had to contribute to the moment somehow. He felt a spontaneous question pushing at the edges of his mind, as they often did. Will had always been far too inquisitive for his own good. His inquisitions had often found him in compromising positions and awkward encounters.

“Were you close to the soldier I bandaged?”

If Hannibal was displeased by the invasiveness of the query, he did not show it. “I know all of my men personally, but he and I are on no special terms. Why do you ask?”

Will blinked. He had expected a rebuff. He was accustomed to being rebuffed, but now he was being entertained. The change settled unevenly against his spine. “I don’t assume you would show such a kindness to me had he not been someone valuable to you.”

“All of my men are valuable to me.”

“Oh.”

Hannibal’s eyes were on him again, dark and perceptive. “You feel as though there must be some specific reason you’re here now, in lieu of my usual indifference.”

Will ducked his head and said nothing.

“Hm.” The captain seemed to mull over this for a time, eyes following Will’s continued prods at the fire. “I could argue that no other Roman has selflessly helped my men without question in a very long time. That, in and of itself, is special enough.” He shrugged, no more than a slight shift of one shoulder. “But that would be quite dishonest, I’m afraid.”

Thoughtful, Will pressed his tongue to the back of his teeth. The man beside him was as enigmatic as they came. After so many years of glimpsing him across battlefields—bloodstained and shadows of death springing from his back—he had expected him to be entirely animalistic. Perhaps he had even expected barbarism. Instead, he sat before a man who spoke with a constant lilt of calm amusement and knowing. This man now seemed to be no warrior at all. He was more akin to a scholar or teacher. The contrast had Will struggling to blend the two men of his perceptions into one.

Hannibal's voice ended Will's thoughts abruptly. "I suppose I have made an exception to ritual because you intrigued me, Will. I am a tired soldier who has seen much of hate and rage and very little of compassion. Your compassion for a man who held no place in your world intrigued me."

"It could be that I was simply doing my duty as a medic." Will didn't know why he felt the need to argue.

"And is that the case?"

A huffed sigh and a jab into the fire. "It was instinct. I see suffering and I am compelled to end it. Is it not the same for you?"

Hannibal made a contemplative sound in the back of his throat. "I am no healer, Will."

Will's jaw clicked every time the other man said his name. He pronounced it in such a peculiar way that Will had never heard before. He enjoyed the sound. "As I've seen."

When there was no reply, Will feared he had finally managed to cause offense. "I didn't mean —"

"Calm yourself." Hannibal raised a mollifying hand. "You are far too prepared for someone to become irate with you."

Will relaxed slightly. "You read me so easily. Am I really so blatant in everything?"

Hannibal pursed his lips. "No. I simply find myself speaking your language."

Their eyes locked and Will felt as though his very organs were being examined one by one. "I must go," he blurted out. The fire had become stifling and the feeling of being an intruder had crept back upon him in a wave. "Thank you for allowing me respite here. Truly." He bowed as he stood to emphasize his gratitude and slung his medical pack over his shoulder. "Thank you," he repeated and turned on his heel.

Hannibal said nothing as Will nearly fled the clearing, avoiding the eyes of the auxilia as he swept quickly through them. Will didn't cease his determined pace until he was back across the banks of the river. Then, he paused, breathes heaving out of his chest as though he had run for days.

If he were asked to pinpoint the particular reason he felt so disquieted, he would be unable to say. It had been everything, all at once. The way Hannibal had looked into him rather than

upon him. The words that had so easily described him as though he were a book plucked from a dusty shelf. The generosity of the peace and silence that had been so willingly given. It had been overwhelming.

“Where have you been?” Lucas’ irritated voice slapped into the air.

“Uh.” Will stood uncomfortably on the bank, shifting between his feet.

“You vanished, you ass.” Lucas stomped over and shoved Will’s lorica segmentata to the smaller man’s chest. “Left me here to watch over your damned armor like a slave.”

“I’m sorry, Lucas.” Will began to shiver. The night was swiftly approaching and the air cooled the water on his legs.

Lucas rolled his eyes and rounded a heavy arm over Will’s shoulders, propelling him forward. “Come on then. Let’s get some food and find somewhere to sleep. Tertius has sentry duty for hours yet and the others have run off to spy on that foolish boy who attacked the Persian. They want to see what fate he sealed for himself.”

“And you didn’t?”

Lucas scowled. “You left me with your armor, remember? Let’s go eat.”

Will smiled softly and allowed himself to be led through the camp. “Alright.”

The night continued on without incident from that point on. The soldier who had quarreled with the mercenary was holed up in a tent on the far edge of the camp. It was likely that his punishment would not be revealed until the light of day. Roman command did very much enjoy a display every now and then. Will was certain the young legionary would be made an example of.

The boy had been foolish to allow his anger to get the best of him. Will had no idea what the Persian had said to him to fuel that rage, but ultimately the contents of the conversation held no consequence. Legionaries were warriors. They were men. And men did not act like bickering children. Self-control was beaten into them from the moment of recruitment. Control your body, your mind, and your emotions.

Soldiers were not to engage in unnecessary brawls or partake of carnality. They were to show restraint in all circumstances. Naturally, so many men bound together in the long treks led to an eventuality. Most would fall prey to their own nature at one time or another, but there was a time and a place. There was convention to adhere to. There was discipline.

Those who had been in the legion long enough knew when and where to engage their baser instincts. During the setting of camp was, unfortunately for the new recruit, neither the time nor the place. As such, the command’s lack of tolerance for the conduct would be unquestionably noted in the day to come.

Upon the realization that they were see no further action that night, most men had returned to their tasks. Guards patrolled along the trenches, ever vigilant eyes settled into the growing

darkness. Commanders had resigned to the rows of officer tents heading the camp to discuss tactics and maneuvers. Those who remained took their rest where they could. Some slept, others ate, and the rest sat together and talked as they watched the stars pull themselves into the night sky.

Will's mind drifted back to the moments in the trees as he picked at the crust of bread in his hand. Lucas was ranting on about something, waving his hands around animatedly, but Will found himself lost in thought and unable to pay him much heed.

Hannibal's words had been smothering. They had poured over Will's shoulders and cocooned him in a debilitating sense of being *seen.* Hannibal's eyes had glanced him over and it seemed that was all it took for him to have every line of Will painted into a portrait. Will got the explicit feeling that even when Hannibal asked him a question, he already knew the answer.

It was as though the older man wasn't interested as much in Will's response as the *way* he responded.

Will couldn't decide if it made him feel examined or appreciated.

He took a shuddering breath and continued to pull uselessly at his bread.

He knew it had been rude to up and leave in the middle of their conversation, but it had all been too much. The desperately needed silence, Hannibal's easily spun words, the way he had felt accepted in that moment for who he was and what he needed. It had almost seemed inappropriate. There should be no comfort in war.

Will felt a gnawing guilt clawing into his chest that he had allowed himself to be comforted by the presence of someone outside the legion. His father's voice chastised him from somewhere in forgotten memory, speaking of unity and peace, but Will knew *war*. He knew soldiers. He knew difference and fighting and judgement.

The auxilia was not part of the Roman army. Romans were loyal to Rome. This was their credo.

All Will had done was sit with a man for a few moments to regain some calm from the day. Was that truly something to feel guilt over? True, the man was no Roman, but he fought alongside the century. He had shed blood with them. Surely that justified a harmonious respect at the very least.

Will dug his heel into the dirt and forced himself to take a bite of his food. Lucas was still rambling on about his irritations and Will was happy to let him continue like a stabilizing buzz of reality lingering on the sidelines.

He had no reason to feel remorse over the events in the clearing. There was no regulation that forbid such an interaction.

And what Hannibal had said was true. There were few here who held any love for Will. Showing friendliness towards the auxilia would do nothing to change that.

Will glanced at his companion, talking with a fervor to himself in the night air. Although Will assumed the few who mattered to him would find his decision to enter the mercenary's camp questionable at best, he would likely receive more intrigue than distaste for the action.

After all, no one walked among the auxilia. No one dared to and no one desired to, and as such, rumors ran rampant through the camps.

The tall tales spun about the Persians forever gracing their edges were as bold as they were brash.

Perhaps his fellow soldiers would be interested in truths. Perhaps they would be compelled.

Will shook his head and finished his meal. Such thoughts were pure foolishness. The men had no care for truth. Grandiosity held the attention of the legionaries, and rightfully so. With years of endless treks through desolate terrain and grueling battles, the men deserved fantastical tales. They would have no desire for the wool to be pulled from their eyes.

They would resent such a thing.

None of these contemplations truly mattered in the end, however. It wasn't as though Will was going to make a ritual of the visit. Hannibal had extended a hand in a single circumstance of gratefulness and Will had ultimately portrayed himself as disrespectful in his rushed departure. The likelihood of a reoccurrence was unlikely, and though Will tried to convince himself he was not disappointed, he felt a small ache in his gut at knowing the peace he had found by that fire had already turned to smoke.

Two years and he would see Rome again.

Two simple years and he could breathe in the air of the city—the stench and sweetness both—and he could rest from blood and cold and hunger. He could escape the wary glares of his century and the pitying looks of his friends. Two years and he could read a book not worn to shreds by his pack. He could eat bread not stale from storage and drink wine that tasted of more than pale and saddened grapes.

Two years and Will could have another moment like the one by the fire; a moment that nudged him back into his own skin.

With that thought to comfort him, Will drifted into a fitful sleep that night.

He dreamed of old books and dark eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Researching ancient Rome is a pain in the ass, by the way.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> "I so rarely find my attention drawn to anything that is not directly in my path. You have tempted my eyes away from the horizon, Will, and I simply endeavor to learn why."

Chapter Notes

> Writing such long chapters (in comparison to what I used to) is very refreshing. I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ancyra was by no means a beautiful or grand city. The buildings were wind-chapped and bare, the brush dry and plain, and the air smelled of salt and manure. Ancyra was a city like most others Will had seen.

But the roads.

The roads were something else entirely.

Ancyra was a hitching post for all means of travelers. Stuck in the midst of plains and rivers, it was the ideal city for trade in western Mesopotamia. All manner of trader, vagrant, and soldier passed through these streets and it was for that very reason that the streets gleamed.

Will marveled at the sight. The construction of the road was exquisite. He had grown so accustomed to the harsh and jagged juts of rock and dirt that made up the paths along their travels. Here the path was paved with stone and clay. A horse's hooves clicked with resounding echoes. The greaves of a soldier allowed for a distinct metallic ring.

There were colors of all kinds; merchants and traders having set up their posts and stalls and stringing their various wares out bare.

Will had feared that Ancyra would be far too meager to refit the entire century and the auxilia. They were of eighty Romans and nearly forty militia, all spread thin and hungry—in need of repairs—but the sight of these roads had given his concern pause. There seemed to be no end to the displays set out to entice passersby.

Caeso had said the city was strong in trade. It had been no exaggeration.

They had been given the right to two days of rest here. Having been on the road for weeks on end, the command recognized the men's need to unwind and find sure footing again. The camps would be set to the south of Ancyra and the men would be free to do as they pleased until the sun was high the second day.

Will planned to make the very most of the pause. He envisioned sleep and reading as he listened to the murmurs of the crowds passing through, but his friends seemed to have other ideas.

"Let's find some real food, shall we?" Cimon clapped a large hand over Will's shoulder, ignoring the flinch it gained. "I've enough of that stale bread to last me ten lifetimes."

"We'll soon be reduced to it again, Cimon. Don't become attached to the allures of city food," Jove warned teasingly. He had always been similar to Will in demeanor; calm and unassuming, but lacking in Will's tendency to forgo considering words before letting them into the air.

As they had been bound to do, the two men missing from the encounter by the river camp had found their way back to the group. Jove and Valerian were always in one another's company, to a degree that caused muted whispers among the soldiers. The suspicions of their relationship were never put to voice and Jove and Valerian both were wise enough to hold discretion at their heels.

Will was unbothered by the implications of their company. He had never seen reason to scrutinize the nature of relationships. What bonds hearts held between themselves was the business of those hearts and those hearts alone. Will was no foolish youth or tense old man with declarations of manhood and endangered masculinity. There was nothing demeaning about respect and compassion, which was all he saw between the two men at his side.

He vicariously enjoyed their happiness.

"Be damned, Jove," Cimon huffed with a grin. "You needn't remind me of our impending doom. Allow me the pleasure of tasting a city for a night."

"And which part of the city do you intend on tasting?" Lucas was pointedly eyeing a young woman passing by, blushing as she saw the soldiers filtering through the streets.

Cimon simpered and nudged Will with his elbow. Will didn't feel himself included in the jest, but smiled regardless. "As much as I can, my dear friend. Isn't that right, Will?"

Will shook his head in humor. "Tempting, Cimon, but I think I'll leave you and Lucas to that task." He received a laugh and a heavy arm around his shoulders, tugging affectionately.

"It's a wonder you don't simply collapse upon yourself with all the stress you leave unattended."

"I attend to my own stress." Will slapped a hand to his forehead as soon as he had spoken, face flushing when he realized the unintentional implications of his words.

Cimon let out a barking laugh, sparing him no pity for the mishap. “As we all do, from time to time.”

“If time to time means every time you’ve gone for a piss,” Lucas grumbled below his breath.

“As if you’re not the same!”

“I’m not denying it.”

Eager for a change in subject, Will looked around curiously. “What of Tertius and Caeso? I’ve not seen them since morning.”

“Caeso will be busying himself with monitoring the resupply for the better part of this day,” Valerian offered. He was walking slowly next to Jove, their shoulders bumping quietly every few steps. His long hair was tied loosely back and he flicked it over his shoulder. “I believe Tertius was assigned to the initial setting of the camp. He’ll be likely to join us later.”

“Unlucky bastards,” Lucas muttered. “I’m starting to like the sound of food.”

“You always like the sound of food.”

“All the better to fuel my hatred for your pointless comments.”

Cimon winked and snapped his fingers. “Try as you might to hide your adoration behind barbs, we all know how you truly feel, Lucas.”

Lucas responded only with a roll of his eyes.

“I’ve been to Ancyra once before,” Jove interjected, jerking his head to the left in direction. “There’s an inn, of sorts, this way. If it’s still there, I’m sure the innkeep would gladly rob us of coin for food.”

Murmurs of agreement dissipated into the crowds of people surrounding them and they made their way to the inn. Much to Jove’s contentment, the inn remained just as he had recalled it.

Will grimaced as they pushed through the doors. The entire span of the room was crammed full of more people than had any right to be in such a small place together. Soldiers, travelers, townsfolk, and even smatterings of the auxilia lined the tables and walls. The noise was loud and raucous and Will felt a debt of gratitude when Cimon tightened his grip around Will’s shoulder to comfort him from the onslaught. His friends knew him and knew him well, a fact that Will would forever cherish.

Valerian shouted over the roar and gestured for them to follow, having found a table at the far corner of the inn. Will allowed Cimon to guide him through the crowd, the burling lump of a man splitting the droves of people like water. They shooed away the young recruits who had gathered around the table, allowing a brief display of superior rank to gain seating.

Will forced himself not to feel guilty.

Eventually, a barmaid found her way to them, rosy smile gleaming as she offered them all wine and bread. Cimon regarded the bread warily and Will drank wine to calm his nerves. Jove did the ordering for them, saying something about poultry and wine and Will trusted that he would enjoy whatever the woman brought back to them. Anything would be more satisfying than bread and figs. Even the wine, though lesser than the samples he'd tasted in Rome, was far superior to the swill they were subjected to in travel.

His eyes raked the crowd, shoulder settled against Cimon in familiarity and comfort. The larger man made no move to extricate himself, far accustomed by now to Will's need for distraction when surrounded by more people than suited his tastes.

Will never considered himself to be a shy man. It was not self-doubt or caution that kept him lingering to the edges of rooms. He simply had no desire to be picked up in the swell of bodies and voices. He enjoyed peace and calm. He enjoyed books and the gentle sounds of water and wind. He had no temperament for festivities. The excitement of the battlefield supplied him in full with such clamor and he found himself desiring nothing more than dusk and fireflies as the day ended.

His desire to be separate from such occasions did not, however, dampen his intrigue at the people who found themselves slipping easily into that skin. Will enjoyed watching the smiles and laughter and enthusiasm of those around him. The entire inn was packed full, likely due to the century passing through, if the surplus of soldiers and auxilia were any indication.

Will found himself surprised to see several legionaries engaging the militia in what seemed to be friendly conversation and drinking. It was a rare sight to see the two groups meshing with one another outside of conflict. It was probable that the relief of rest and good wine had loosened inhibitions enough to allow such socializing.

His eyes continued to skirt over the room, vaguely listening to the conversation of the men around his table. They were speaking of horses and women and music and it was a pleasant backdrop to the chaos. Will's inspection came to an abrupt halt when he found his eyes caught by a dark gaze. Snared was a more appropriate word, he found, as he could not tear his eyes away.

Will could not the restrain the tremor in his chest when he saw the other man. Whether it was from surprise or excitement or something else entirely, he had no idea. Hannibal was the type of intrigue that Will could only hope to understand at the barest levels. He wondered if he would only ever be able to skim the surface of that mystery.

He wondered why he wondered at all.

Will couldn't blink, confusion bleeding into his mind as Hannibal made no move to look away. Why was he staring him down in such a way? An invitation? A challenge? A simple acknowledgment? Will found himself wanting to know which answer was apt.

He had entirely expected Hannibal to forget him completely, despite their meeting having been less than two nights ago. Will found himself to be forgettable—he aimed for it. It seemed now that those efforts were in vain. If the look he was receiving now was any

indication, Hannibal certainly remembered him. Will could only flounder helplessly in trying to glean whether or not the recollection was one of fondness or irritation.

Eventually, the need to blink became overwhelming and Will succumbed, blinking again in shock as he saw that Hannibal's eyes were no longer upon him. It was as though their gazes had never even met and Will found himself doubting his own perception. Had they been staring at all or was it all some sort of fevered imagining caused by wine and the overstimulation of the inn? Will had no way to be sure. Reluctantly, he tore his eyes away from the dark man across the room and made an effort to engage in the conversation.

Valerian was speaking. "The cavalry has lost five this month alone. We need better resources to keep the horses well."

Will frowned. "The horses are dying?"

"It's not unusual to lose some, as you know," Valerian replied. He was the optio of the century, a soldier in charge of training troops and the man to stand ground should the centurion fall in battle. As such, he interacted with all manner of men in the century, from the cavalry to the foot soldiers. "But the weather has been particularly dry and our horses suffer dehydration and weakness. Soon we'll be upon ocean waters and that is no means to keep a horse properly watered, by any stretch of the imagination."

Will toyed with the cup of wine in his hands. "And the solution?"

Valerian chuckled. "The true question and the one of debate among command at the moment. We have the option to bring more water with us for the horses alone, but the weight and mass would require assistance from the auxilia, of which Caeso is not fond of requesting favors. Another option would be to allow the cavalry and their decurio to ride ahead to Tarsus. With speed they could reach the city before the horses weaken and allow them rest until we arrive and find ourselves in the inevitable trek along the coast."

"Which would leave us without the flanking aid of the cavalry, should we need it," Jove supplied.

"If pride is the only thing keeping us from guarding our flank, Caeso will surely bite his lip and suffer it," Cimon said. He had given in to the bread on the table and was pulling it apart. "He'd not put the men at risk in such a way, even though we are within our own borders. Not with the possibility of invasion from the east."

"It's not so simple." Valerian nodded at the barmaid in thanks as she spread the food out on the table for them, leaning forward with a display of breasts held poorly by her dress. Will wondered if she felt required to do so to keep soldiers entertained and pleasant. He felt sorry for her. "The auxilia could help us, yes, but this would slow our pace considerably, regardless. We are already suffering lateness from the incident with the bandits. Our post will be reached almost a week off mark. To overburden the auxilia could make that nearly a month."

Will sighed with content as he bit into the chicken the barmaid had brought. It had been far too long since they'd had any decent meat to eat. "So either way we cripple ourselves. Either

in task or in security."

Valerian sighed heavily. "Precisely. Hence the debate. It's likely we'll move towards sending the cavalry forth to Tarsus. We are far enough away from Persian borders that concern for attack would not be enough to bring sweat to many brows."

"Do you really think that Persia will attempt us?"

Lucas shrugged through a mouthful of chicken. "I wouldn't be surprised." He raised his hand to hold the inevitable retorts at bay. "I'm not referring to my distaste for Persians. Their new leader, Ardashir, has made his desire to claim Armenia clear without dispute. Emperor Severus knows little of battle. He wishes to do nothing more than talk pretty and throw veiled threats. From what I've heard, Ardashir is stubborn enough to take insult to diplomacy rather than appreciation."

"It's what happens when we have a diplomat for emperor during times of war," Cimon grumbled.

"Watch yourself, Cimon." Valerian's warning was kind but stern. "Speaking ill of the emperor could reach ears you don't wish to reach here. Save your words for private quarters."

Cimon balked but acquiesced, focusing again on his food.

"Even if Ardashir decides against Severus' attempts at diplomacy," Jove cut through the tension in an attempt to return to the purpose of the conversation. "The time it would take for his troops to cross our borders, and successfully at that, would still allow us time to reach Antioch. I've heard rumors that Rome is considering Antioch to issue as a location for command. I think it's the reason we're being sent there. We're to be the guard of the city, I'd imagine, should Severus move his operations there."

Will swallowed roughly, not liking the sound of that in the least. If that was truly the case, they would be on the edge of the front lines should they go to war with Persia. Will had been in battle more times than he cared to remember, but never on the front lines of all-out war. The possibility settled thickly in his gut and his appetite fled.

In a desperate desire to escape the discomfort of his own mind, Will found himself looking for Hannibal across the room. He didn't know what he expected to see should their eyes meet again, but he felt compelled to try. To his surprising level of disappointment, Hannibal was gone.

Will felt a cold rock of discouragement in the bottom of his throat. It frustrated him and he didn't understand its purpose.

"Forgive me, but I could do with some air," Will announced as he stood from the table.

Cimon gave him a concerned look. "Require company?"

Will shook his head and pushed a smile to his lips. "No, no. I'm fine, truly. Just cramped in here."

They all seemed satisfied with the answer. It was true, after all. Will received no further argument as he made his way to leave the inn, nodding and waving back as they all shouted after him to find them later.

In truth, Will had no idea as to why he felt such a sudden urge to leave. When he had noticed Hannibal was no longer there, an eager curiosity had taken wing within him. Impulsively, he followed it.

He'd only made it three steps from the door.

"I see the distractions drove more than I from the depths of that place."

Stunned, Will froze in his tracks. Slowly, as though entrapped in tar, he turned to meet the amused face of Hannibal. The auxilia captain was leaning patiently against the wall, watching the people clamor past on the road with a detached sort of observation.

"You waited for me?" Will blurted it out before he could help himself, as per usual. He immediately felt a wave of embarrassment. How presumptuous it was of him to assume such an asinine thing. It was likely that Hannibal had sought refuge from the noise himself. The idea that it had anything to do with Will was ludicrous.

"Yes."

Will felt color flood his cheeks. Perhaps not so ludicrous after all. "Why?"

"I noticed your discomfort and felt I owed it to you to offer an alternative should you need one."

Will spluttered and looked at the other man as if he'd grown another head. "Owed *me*? What could you possibly owe *me* for?"

Hannibal smiled, a genuine thing, and pushed away from the wall. "For engaging conversation, a gift I have not been graced with in some time."

Dumbstruck, Will looked about as though to ask someone if they were witnessing the exchange. Perhaps he had gone insane and was imagining the entirety of it. "I'm not particularly engaging."

"All the more so for not realizing you are," Hannibal disagreed in good humor. "I'll endeavor to make you think otherwise."

Will was certain his face could only be more reddened if there were blood upon it. "I've absolutely no idea how I have managed to intrigue you so."

A deep laugh and Hannibal was gesturing for him to follow with the same unfaltering confidence he had possessed before. "Come."

Will chewed the inside of his cheek even as he followed, aggravated by how easily he fell to Hannibal's command. "You say that word a lot."

“Why change the word if it serves its purpose?”

Will was momentarily infuriated by how logical that was and stopped dead in his tracks, pride tugging at the back of his neck.

Hannibal paused and turned to look at him, a thoughtful expression overtaking his countenance. After a moment of deliberation, he spoke. “I would very much enjoy it if you would accompany me.” This time, he simply waited for Will to begin following him again. He made no move forward.

Will swallowed and felt rude. Hannibal was extending an olive branch. He did not seem to be a man who made requests often. He was a commander; a leader. He gave orders. He gave commands. The fact that he was allowing Will this decision now, with such obvious effort, was entirely flattering and intimidating all at once.

Will ran a hand through his unkempt hair. “Where do you wish to go?” It wasn’t said abrasively. It was more akin to inquisitive agreement and Hannibal seemed minutely pleased by this.

“North of the city are gardens. They are a fine escape from the bustle of the streets. They are quiet.”

Will tried not to make associations with a man inviting him to spend an afternoon in a garden with him. The implications were ones he felt too flustered to entertain. If Will was honest with himself, it sounded pleasant. His only desire had been to rest somewhere quiet and soothing. Once again, Hannibal had seemed to notice this need and was moving to assuage it. He nodded and Hannibal began walking again, leading Will down the winding streets.

Will walked awkwardly behind him, taking the time to truly observe the man for the first time.

His gait was strong and confident, walking as though he owned the earth beneath his feat as surely as he owned the clothes on his back. The clothes themselves caught Will’s attention. Intricately carved leather made up the torso of the armor, a deep brown edging on black that had enough give to twist with movement. Loose, darkly dyed cotton wrapped around his legs and tucked into thick boots. A dagger braced his thigh and a curving sword was at his back.

“Your armor is thin.” Will hoped his comment would not be taken as insult.

“I find metal restricting and deadening,” Hannibal replied, showing Will up narrow steps and brushing his hand along the sandstone of the wall. “Movement is just as useful a defense as iron.”

“True.” Will licked at his lips and followed Hannibal around the narrow curve of an alley. “I find movement my best defense merely because I lack the proper skills in combat to maintain a defense. Though I know from my own eyes that you do not suffer from the same shortcomings.”

Hannibal allowed him a toothy smile at the compliment and the openness of it stunned Will into silence for the rest of the walk. Unable to find further words, he decided to continue his inspection of the man before him.

Once again, he found his eyes drawn to the unique markings adorning the muscles of Hannibal's forearms. Dark and twisting, they were complex things. He had seen men and women with ink stained into their bodies before, but it was a rare and uncommon sort of decoration that he had never had the privilege of witnessing up close.

He had been so focused on the markings that Hannibal was forced to wave a hand in front of his face to gain his attention.

"Sorry." Will considered how many more times he would embarrass himself in one day.

"Don't be." Hannibal tilted his head and waited for Will's eyes to follow the movement. "The garden."

Will's breath left him in a rush. It had been so long since he had seen something like this. The flowers and shrubs were by no means perfectly manicured, but they hung in a stretch amidst the flaking sandstone and dull greys of the city. It was a stark and beautiful contrast to the muted color.

The descended into the thick of it, the trees and vines obscuring their view of the city. Will felt like the moment was separate from the rest of the world. He felt utterly content.

"Thank you." He hadn't meant to sound as rapturous as he did.

Hannibal nodded and sat on a stone bench, watching silently as Will traced his palms over the soft petals of the purple flowers hanging to his right. Will took in a deep, steadying breath and tried to forget, if only for a moment, that they were likely walking into war in two days.

"You seem to try very admirably to bring me calm," Will said quietly.

"I find myself enjoying my ability to do so," came the candid reply.

Will met Hannibal's eyes, searching. If there was intention there, he could not find it. Try as he might, no ulterior motive or coercive plan came to light in the dark irises that stared back at him. He allowed himself to relax. "I enjoy that you can." He hoped the admission was not misinterpreted. He wasn't entirely sure himself which interpretation would be accurate. Rather than overthink it, he sat down next to Hannibal on the bench. "It's been a long many years."

"It has." Hannibal's concurrence held the weight of a man decades into violence.

"I know you'll likely give me yet another cryptic response, but I still don't understand why you've taken such an interest in me." Will knew he should refrain from pushing the matter so, but it was gnawing at his thoughts and he couldn't push the question away.

"Is that how you see it?" Hannibal asked, raising a brow. "Me taking an *interest*?"

The particular inflection had heat rushing all the way from Will's chest to his ears. Perhaps he hadn't been mistaken when his intuition had spoken to him of implications. He didn't feel nearly as uncomfortable as he expected at the realization. "Is it?"

Hannibal seemed to consider this in earnest, leaning back against the iron gate that closed off the garden behind the bench. "Would you be entirely offended?"

Will regressed to his nervous habit of chewing at his lower lip. He looked over the older man and gave in to a moment of introspection. His reply was hesitant. "I am debating honesty here because I do not know what words my honesty will bring."

Hannibal hummed in understanding. "I understand that such an arrangement is not looked upon kindly in the ranks of your military."

Will's heart leapt to attention at the statement, beating quickly behind his ribcage. They weren't dancing around words anymore. There was no implication. Hannibal's statement was a blatant one. It left no room for doubt of his intentions. "You're blunt."

"I see no reason not to be," Hannibal responded, turning to look Will square in the eye. He seemed entirely at ease with the conversation. "To be clear, I have no intention of simply taking you to bed, Will. I enjoy your company and your conversation. I would be entirely satisfied that remained to be the extent of our friendship."

Mouth dry, Will tried in vain to formulate a coherent response. Hearing Hannibal speak of taking him to bed in any capacity had stolen the words right out from under him. It had been a long time since anyone had suggested such a thing beyond the joking jabs of his friends. "You think I'm bothered that you are a man?"

Hannibal appeared genuinely surprised at the statement. "I assumed that to be the concern."

Will smiled and looked away. He couldn't withstand the heat of the captain's gaze any longer. "I've never been bothered by that. I find it contemptuous and ignorant to belittle such things." He heard an intrigued intake of breath beside him and it made his heart skip a beat. "But it does stand to be noted that despite my views, it is a dangerous endeavor for a soldier. There is a strict code a legionary must abide by. Stricter punishments should those restrictions go unheeded."

"You fear consequence, then." Somehow, Hannibal managed to keep accusation from seeping into the tone. Will was impressed, once more, by the poise of the man next to him.

"I fear a great many things," Will admitted. "Consequence is among them, yes, but I will not lie and say that I'm not intrigued by you as well, Hannibal." Saying Hannibal's name in such a capacity nearly felt dirty as it left Will's mouth. It was as though he had cursed and said something entirely debauched.

If the darkening of Hannibal's eyes was any indication, the Persian felt similarly.

"And were consequence of no importance?"

“I would still find myself wavering.”

“For what reason?”

“Doubt, perhaps. Not of you, but of the potential for anything but an ultimately disappointing end.” Will felt emboldened by this streak of honesty. It was entirely unlike him to be so forthcoming. He was impulsive and spoke with haste, but never was he so unabashedly open as he found himself being now. “Perhaps I fear you would discover your interest was misplaced.”

“Or that war would render it unfulfilled,” Hannibal added.

Will took a deep breath, nodding at the words he had been afraid to speak himself. He didn’t want to find himself attached to someone who would die in front of his eyes. He didn’t want someone to become attached to him only for him to die before them. He didn’t want to tempt fate in such a way—to welcome such pain.

“I’m not implying that the depth of it would be so serious as to cause such torment,” Will said finally. He didn’t want Hannibal to believe him an infatuated boy, but he knew himself well enough to know that he cared for those close to him. He had watched two friends die over his years of battle, one while his hands were buried in the other man’s wounds, and the thought of adding yet another name to the list that he couldn’t bear to shorten was not a welcome one.

Hannibal watched him closely, as though inspecting Will’s very thoughts as they came. “If you live your life in fear of pain, you will find no life lived at all.”

Will laughed. “Now you’re just trying to convince me.”

Hannibal smiled. “Perhaps.”

Will found his lip between his teeth again, weighing a question on his tongue. “What is it that you want of me? Tell me truthfully.” He turned wide eyes to the captain and waited, unsure of which answer he would like to receive.

Hannibal’s eyes met Will’s, sliding down his face to his lips, then his chest, and back to his eyes again. “If I were entirely honest with you, Will, then I would say that I want a great many things of you. I want your conversation. I want your company. And I would very much like to touch you.”

Will made a small sound in the back of his throat and his lips pressed tightly together. “Ah.” Not as eloquent as he had intended, but it made his thoughts clear enough.

“I’ve never been one for courtship. I find it to be a waste of time, even more so when we find ourselves walking the lines of peace and war.” Hannibal pushed his dark hair back and out of his eyes, looking over the foliage that surrounded them. “But I must confess that I have been entirely hesitant until the moment you tended to one of my men. That night was not the first I noticed you across a riverbank or field.”

The open admission that Hannibal had been interested in Will even before now had Will's mind spinning, but it would be abhorrently dishonest to say it was not a similar situation on his side of the coin. He had always noticed Hannibal. The mesmerizing manner in which he carried himself, both on and off the battlefield, was something that was impossible to ignore. "I cannot deny a similar confession, though I am recently inexperienced in this matter." It wasn't that he hadn't been with men. He had. Rome was a strange and infinite place and many happenings took place behind closed doors, but it had been a long time since Will had been with anyone at all. He had never enjoyed the disconnect of quick encounters or men and women of certain services.

Being a legionary was not a position in which one was allowed the freedom to pursue their proclivities. Regulations about the conduct of the men were strict and clear, and though many found ways to edge around the boundaries of prudence, Will had never been one to risk his position in the service of Rome. It was by no means an act of patriotism that had Will abstaining from licentious behavior, merely a desire to keep himself far and well away from trouble of any kind.

Will's enlistment into the military had not been a voluntary one. Upon his father's death, he'd been offered two hands. One led him into the legion and the other into servitude. At the time, the freedom of travel and promises of land and wealth at the end of his duty were far more inviting than the prospect of being barely ranked above a slave, even if it would take twenty years of his life away from him.

Will was eleven years into his twenty as a legionary. He had no desire to squander away the time and patience he had poured into over a decade of blood and cold by defying the regimen of Rome for the sake of some brief encounter in carnality.

It was pointless to him, risking his neck and his future to bed or be bedded.

But in that moment, as Hannibal silently watched him lose himself in his own thoughts, Will found his feet teetering on a precipice and he didn't know which way to step next.

"You know nothing of me," Will began slowly, chewing at his lip and refusing to meet Hannibal's eyes. "Looks from a distance, no matter how lingering…" He sighed wearily. "And no matter if we both partook of these looks equally. We know nothing of one another. You ask me to risk my position."

"I ask nothing of you that you are not willing to give, Will." Hannibal touched Will's shoulder to gain his attention before withdrawing his hand immediately back to his side. "I said to you I would be content with nothing more than conversation. It was no deception. You say we do not know one another. Though you may not believe my reasons, my desire is merely to change that. I so rarely find my attention drawn to anything that is not directly in my path. You have tempted my eyes away from the horizon, Will, and I simply endeavor to learn why."

Will swallowed over the lump in his throat. "You cannot speak to me in such a way and expect me to want anything other than to agree with you."

Hannibal smirked at that. "Should I be trying to convince you that this is all a terrible idea?"

“If you were wise and cautious, yes.”

“Though I don’t have the wisdom of a king, I believe I hold enough knowledge within me to be of some merit.” Hannibal rubbed his thumbs into his own tanned palms, pursing his lips. “But I make no claims to being a cautious man.”

“Does your militia have no such rules against this?”

“None whatsoever. My men are free to do as they please. If they serve well in duty and battle, there is no reason to deprive them of their needs.”

“Even between men?” Will was truly intrigued by this. Though the coupling of men was by no means an insidious topic in Roman culture, it held a great many assumptions, especially in regards to the receptive member of the party.

“You shame your men for willingness to take pleasure from another,” Hannibal said astutely. “I have never understood the judgment. For a man to trust in the power and care of another, however briefly, is seen as a benefit where I come from. It is seen as a strength. Men who cower behind accusations of femininity are beyond me. There is nothing feminine about a man confident enough in himself to know he is a man regardless of physicality.”

“Love between men is celebrated, then, in Persia?” Will couldn’t envision this. Men lying with one another in Rome was an act between a man of standing and his lesser. It was never between equals and only the man who took the dominant hold was looked upon with any sort of dismissive respect. It was accepted in shadows and behind doors—nothing more.

“Love?” Hannibal chuckled at Will’s blush. “Yes, I suppose. Celebrated is an unnecessary word, but it is not berated as it is here. It is merely another form of humanity. Humanity is a thing that takes many forms. To condemn one form would be to condemn them all.”

Will was fascinated. The concept of such an ideal was thrilling to him. It was not simply in the acceptance of men with one another, but the image of accepting people as they were, no matter the difference. For all the vastly varied cultures of Rome, there had always been an explicit separation between the people. There had always been notable differences of rank and wealth and importance. There were lessers and betters. It had always been this way. “Why did you leave?”

Hannibal’s brows furrowed and he looked down at his arms, silent.

Will only realized then how forward the question had been. He had no right to ask such a truth of Hannibal. “Forgive me. I did not mean to pry.”

“No.” Hannibal shook his head roughly as though to clear his thoughts like cobwebs. “I said I wished for us to know one another. It would be hypocritical of me to go against such words now. The length of the story is best saved for another time, but suffice it to say that despite the benefits of certain aspects of Persian culture, the path my life took was a less fortunate one. I had no desire to continue down the road I had found myself pushed upon. Work as a mercenary was far more appealing than the alternatives presented to me.”

Will frowned, but didn't push the subject. He watched at Hannibal absently traced the markings on his arm and decided it would be best not to ask him about them as he had wished to. "I didn't want to bring any unpleasant memories to the surface."

"Unpleasant memories cannot be helped." Hannibal allowed him a soft smile of forgiveness. "It's those very memories that give us the stability we need to avoid creating new ones."

"Not all unpleasantness can be avoided." Will rubbed at his knees as a breeze swept through the garden, wishing the shorts below his tunic was as long as Hannibal's trousers. He envied the clothing of the nations around them. Robes and togas and tunics had never suited him. "Sometimes the unpleasant will fall at your feet no matter where you turn."

"A pessimistic but true view of things, I'm afraid," Hannibal murmured. "Bad things will happen, but with age and experience we can lessen the assault."

"I've not the age to claim I know how to do such a thing." Will felt a nervousness tug in his chest, then. How much younger was he than Hannibal? Will was not a week past twenty-six. He knew Hannibal must be far older, but the understanding had dawned only then, further solidifying the nagging voice that told him this was all far too inappropriate.

Hannibal didn't seem to have a similar crisis of age. "And yet I have seen none of the uninhibited rage or impudence of your comrades in you."

Will shifted on the bench. "I don't enjoy being the cause of chaos."

"You'd be surprised how few young men would agree with such a sentiment."

They were quiet, then, for the longest stretch of time. The perfume of the flowers spun around them in wisps and the clamor of the city was dulled by the distance and approaching dusk. Will watched placidly as a moth fluttered to rest on some vines.

"If I were to say I would enjoy conversations with you, what then?" Will didn't turn to look. He felt shied enough as it was by the words exchanged between them. He didn't need Hannibal's face making it any more disconcerting.

Hannibal made a contemplative sound. "Then I would request that you come to visit me on evenings where duty does not keep you. My men would care not if you entered our camps, so long as you showed them a respectful distance and peace."

"And what of my friends, should they ask why I visit you so?"

"You claim to be no master of the sword," Hannibal replied, giving Will an almost devious look. "Allow me to teach you."

Intimidated would not come near to the emotion that Will felt then. "I've no talent for it, I assure you. I have seen you in battle and the skill with which you wield a blade would be entirely beyond me."

A laugh. "All skills can be learned."

“Believe me, they have tried to teach me.”

“Then they have not done so properly.”

Will grimaced in indecision. “I would disappoint you.”

“You have yet to do so.”

“There is always a first.”

Hannibal’s eyes were alight with playfulness. “Then I challenge you to disprove my confidence.”

The glimmer in Hannibal’s eyes was intoxicating. Will found himself agreeing against the protest of the self-deprecating shouts in his mind. “Alright. Caeso won’t like it, but alright.”

“Caeso?”

“The legatus of our cohort.”

“Ah, the one who dragged your legionary off by the ears that night.”

Will winced and remembered the morning after in which the young legionary had been tied to a post, dressed only in his tunic, to allow the hot sun to melt some sense into him. Will had attempted to deliver the man water in midday only to be brusquely admonished by Caeso. “He is a dear friend, but a dear friend who is not fond of the need for an auxilia with our century.”

“A traditionalist, then.” Hannibal didn’t appear to be offended. “And would he forbid your visits?”

Will smiled with a fondness. “I doubt there is much Caeso would forbid of me, save for dying and drinking the last of his wine.”

“Then it’s settled.” Hannibal stood promptly, turning to offer Will his hand.

Will took his hand after a short breath and felt his palm sweat against Hannibal’s warm skin. He dropped his hand to his side as soon as he stood, feeling young and sheepish. “Yes, I suppose it is. Though I assure you, you will regret ever trying to teach me anything of the sword.”

Hannibal’s expression remained unphased. “And I maintain my challenge for you to prove that theory.”

Not much was said between them after that. Hannibal had walked him back to the inn, ignoring the curious looks they gained from the soldiers milling about on the streets, and then left him to his own devices with the promise that he would await Will’s visit.

Will’s skin was prickling with electricity now that Hannibal was gone. He shifted back and forth on his feet with an anxious energy, mind reeling over the events that had taken place in

the past hour.

What had he agreed to? He couldn't be sure.

Had he agreed to friendship? Training? Plain conversation? Or had it been something more?

Hannibal had made no secret of his opinion of Will. He had made his purpose to be entirely clear and Will had found himself filled with a deep appreciation for the honesty of him. And yet, in the same breath as admitting his interest in the younger man, Hannibal had assured him of no immediate desires or needs. He had requested of Will no more than he was willing to give.

The trouble was that Will had absolutely no clue what it was he wanted to give.

Someone like Hannibal, a leader among men, had no business being interested in someone like Will. Will was a side note in history. He knew this and accepted this, but the way Hannibal looked at him spoke of heroics and legends and glorious tales. Hannibal looked at Will as though Will clung to the greatest story of them all and he wanted nothing more than to read it.

It was an empowering feeling to be looked at in such a way.

Will found himself doubting the validity of it. That doubt had spurred a reckless impatience in him to find out if this was truly all within his imagination; an impatience to be looked at that way once more.

He found Lucas waiting for him on a barrel by the inn.

"Why is it always me left behind to retrieve you?" Lucas tried to sound irritable, but the slur of wine made the rough edges of his tone blur.

"Because no one else sits still as solidly as you can?" Will offered. "You are a log among men."

"Ha!" Lucas guffawed and slapped Will across the shoulder, sending the smaller man stumbling. "Okay, you're forgiven. Where were you?"

Will pinched his lips together and weighed his options. If he told Lucas the truth, or at the very least part of it, he risked a conversation he did not wish to have. If he lied poorly, which he was likely to do should lying be his tactic of choice, Lucas would become aggravated and inform the others that something was amiss. "I was with the auxilia captain."

Lucas' look of pure consternation was something to behold. "Come again?"

Will let out a loud exhale and gestured for them to start walking. He was tired of standing still. "That night when the legionary attacked the Persian, I tended to the Persian who was injured."

"I know. Always too kind for your own good, Will." The temper of Lucas' voice was soothed over by warmth.

“The auxilia captain saw my actions and spoke with me. We conversed, for a time, and he thanked me.”

Lucas grunted in surprise but said nothing, grabbing onto Will’s arm as he stumbled somewhat drunkenly on a stone.

Will held his companion with a steadying hand. “I came upon him again this afternoon. We shared friendly conversation and he made an interesting suggestion to me.” It was here where the entire outcome of the situation hinged on Will’s choice of words. If he chose poorly, Lucas would likely rankle beyond repair.

The suspicion in Lucas’ eyes held no room for doubt of this consequence. “And what suggestion was that?”

“I told him I lacked skill in the ways of the sword.” Lucas snorted and Will chose to maturely ignore it. “He suggested that to repay my kindness to his soldier, he could teach me methods that might help me better my combat.”

Lucas stopped and Will feared the worst.

“It’s a good idea.”

Will’s eyebrows could have shot to his hairline. “You think so?”

“I’ve no love for those arrogant bastards,” Lucas said, wine-red face scrunching with distaste. “But they know their way around a blade. If he’s offering to teach you something he knows, take the offer. You’re a good medic, Will—a great one—but I’m tired of watching Caeso fret over your wellbeing on the battlefield. Roman training has done you no favors. If this *captain* can keep you returning alive until the end of our duty, I have no argument that could sufficiently outweigh the benefit.”

“You’re awfully eloquent for a drunk.”

“I’ve only two bottles of wine, Will. There is plenty more drinking to be had before I am sufficiently ruined.”

Will laughed, eyes crinkling. He would be done in with half a bottle of wine and yet here stood Lucas, two bottles in and giving lectures about the benefits of weapons training. The man had a stomach made of steel. “So you don’t oppose the idea?”

“Caeso will, but you know that.”

Will nodded grimly.

“But I know that Cimon and Valerian in particular will agree with me when I say that although you should approach him with caution, it would be foolish continue on as you are. We are approaching war. You know it. I know it. We all know it. We can feel it in our bones.” Lucas looked infinitely darkened in that moment, as though the threat of Persia loomed in the very clouds above their heads. “These will be no small skirmishes we face, Will. Ducking and dodging might not be enough for you on those fields.”

Will’s entire chest filled with warmth. Lucas hated anyone outside of their immediate group, foreigners especially, but even he was willing to put aside those displeasures if it meant Will would be more able to defend himself.

Then, Will felt an immense guilt. He had not been lying, per se. Hannibal had indeed promised to help train him, even though Will sincerely doubted in his own capabilities. His retelling of the tale had not been entirely dishonest, but there was no denying the large depth of what he had omitted blotted out the sincerity of the moment.

He shoved the thoughts away. He had not lied. He would be training and although he wished it, he did not require the approval of his fellows for a new friendship. There was no reason for guilt here.

“Thank you, Lucas.”

“What are you thanking me for?”

“For not wanting me to die.”

Lucas rolled his eyes and pushed between Will’s shoulder blades, propelling him down the street. “Shut up and take me to get properly drunk.”

Chapter End Notes

Historically speaking, the empire that the story refers to as Persia was actually known as the Sasanian empire (but Persia is also accurate). It was, alongside Rome, one of the most powerful empires of that time period and was based out of what is now Iran. I've decided to stick to referring to it entirely as Persia to keep things from becoming too confusing. "King" Ardashir I and Emperor Alexander Severus were both real people and the events of the war taking place are, for the most part, based on actual events. I know that the makeup of the legion and its rankings can get incredibly confusing, but I'll try my best to make it less convoluted...if I can, haha.

The first chapter of this story was received so well and I'm really grateful for all your support. I'm having a lot of fun writing it and I hope you're having fun reading. Things are going to start getting interesting soon, what with inevitable war and death and possible naughty bits around the corner and all.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> “Your definition has formed into one of bravery, selflessness, and grace. You dodge blows that most men would meet their end by. You rush into chaos and death without blinking to save the lives of men you barely know. I see no fear in you in those moments and certainly no weakness.”

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all of your comments and kudos. They're lovely and I eat them for breakfast and dinner, but not lunch because I have to eat pizza at some point in the day, obviously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will heaved a deep sigh under the sweltering sun. They had been on the road to Tarsus for two days now and the weather had turned from dull and grey to red and searing. The tundra seemed to dry and crackle away underneath his very feet as he walked. A bead of sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eye. He winced and rubbed away the sting.

His gaze shifted westward, eyeing the auxilia that made up their flank. They were too far away and the heat was much too overbearing for him to see anyone clearly. Frowning, he faced forward. He had not seen Hannibal since the night in Ancyra three days prior. The conversation they had shared seemed so faint it was almost as though it had been nothing more than an imagining. It was a whisper of smoke in the back of his mind. Perhaps it should stay that way.

His thoughts were cut short by a shout and a thud. Eyebrows raised, he witnessed a soldier upon the ground and two men leaning over to tend to him. He couldn’t make sense of the scene in his heat-addled brain.

“Immunes!”

Will blinked.

“You, immunes! Willhelm, is it not?”

Startling back to his senses, Will nodded and stepped forward. “What’s happened?”

The men were murmuring amongst themselves and the two kneeling next to the fallen legionary looked humorously perplexed. “I don’t know, sir. One moment he stood and the next he lay still.”

Will frowned and dropped to his knees next to the unconscious young man. He reached forward, pulling back his eyelids and feeling under his nose for breath. “He’s alright. Just fainted.”

A man behind him snorted, but a sharp look from an officer found him silenced.

“Dehydration, I’m sure,” Will offered to placate the men’s confused stares. “The heat and steady pace has caught up with him. We are short on water with the rationing for Tarsus. It is likely more men will follow suit if we do not acclimate to the weather.”

“What do you suggest?” the officer looming above them questioned. “We cannot stop here. We will not be making camp for another six hours yet.”

Will chewed on his lip and nodded, tucking his pack to his side. “Leave me with a few men. I will tend to him and we will follow suit as soon as he is able.”

The officer seemed displeased with this, looking over his shoulder in search of a superior. “It is not a custom of ours to leave men in our wake, soldier.”

“I know,” Will replied calmly. If he had any chance at convincing the man of his idea, he must remain placid. “On my word, we will not be far behind. He cannot move as he is and to carry him through the sun would be unwise. Halting the entire century would be equally impossible. Allow me to rouse him and give him a much needed pause. We will not be far behind.”

Reluctant, the officer nodded and signaled for the men to start moving again. A few more gestures and a some skeptical legionaries remained where they stood. Will sighed with relief when he saw that Valerian had come over to inspect the disruption.

“You’re staying back?” Valerian inquired, glancing at the fallen soldier before turning to exchange a few hushed words with the officer Will had spoken to.

Will gave him a curious look when he remained behind with the rest of them, the century trudging off down the path towards Tarsus.

Valerian smiled. “You need someone of rank to stay behind with you, Will. It wouldn’t do to have no officers among you.”

“I hadn’t thought of it,” Will admitted. He felt a shuddering relief wash over him that Valerian had decided to stay. He didn’t know any of the men surrounding him. It was good to have a friendly face to take comfort in. He pressed his hand to the forehead of the man below him. It was burning. “We must move him to shade.”

Valerian grunted and waved to the six soldiers lingering uncertainly at the sidelines. “The trees to the south!” he shouted, gesturing a few hundred yards away. “Let’s move him.

Quickly now. We haven't got time for you to hold your thumbs up your asses!"

A few of the men laughed at the comment. Valerian was a well-liked commander. Most of the men were more than willing to follow his lead. Will felt lucky in the friendships he had made.

After a few fumbling attempts and a great deal of complaints, the dead weight of the unconscious legionary was hefted into the sparse shadow of the trees littering the edge of the valley. Will settled himself down next to the man, worrying his lower lip as he waited for him to awaken. He hoped he would not have to wake him forcefully. To rise willingly from a faint was far preferable to being stolen from the unanticipated slumber; for both body and mind.

"We should wait a while," Will suggested. "See if he rouses on his own. It's unwise to rip a man from a torpid state such as this. It may do more harm than good."

Valerian nodded, making no move to question him. Will was grateful for the small mercy. One question of his medical expertise and all the men would become restless. With Valerian's acquiescence, the men began to settle around in the trees, taking the moment for what it was.

Will breathed in the thick air. No matter how hard he tried, he could not seem to fill his lungs. The air was far too heavy and humid. It was a surprise no men had fallen sooner. The conditions were not agreeable in the least.

There was the crunch of footsteps and the soldiers stiffened, hands going to the hilts of their blades. Concerned, Will put a protective arm over the fallen man in instinct, looking for the danger.

Two men from the auxilia were trekking across the brush towards them, dark faces laced over with an irritated compliance. The legionaries hesitated, hands still on their swords.

"Why have you joined us?" Valerian asked, his unbothered posture helping to soothe the nerves around him. He was nowhere near as mistrustful of the militia as most of the century. He saw no need to judge men by their origins. Will's father would have liked him. "It's unusual, to say the least."

The taller of the two Persians sneered, but it didn't seem a wholly disagreeable thing. "Agreed. Our commander ordered us here when he saw your group break off. He wished us to offer assistance, should we be needed." He spoke impressively. He was educated. It was likely the reason Hannibal had chosen him to venture towards the broken link of the century. Sending men who couldn't so much as hold a conversation with the Romans would do little good.

"Assistance?" Valerian mulled over the word, surprised. "This is very unlike your captain, I must say. I mean no offense."

The Persian laughed. "You simply say what's already on our minds, but his reasoning was sound enough. Our contract is to protect your group. Should part of yours stray, it seems only fitting that part of ours stray alongside it."

Will narrowed his eyes and stared at the ground. The logic was fair enough, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the arrival of the two men had little to do with contractual obligations.

Was Hannibal keeping an eye on him?

The thought didn't disturb him as much as it should.

In fact, it intrigued him.

Seemingly satisfied with the answer, Valerian gestured for the legionaries to relax their postures. They did so with some reluctance. "One of our men succumbed to the heat. The rationing of water for the length of the trip to Tarsus is beginning to take its toll. Our immunes dictated we stay and tend to him before proceeding."

Will flushed as the attention was turned to him. "The sun is at the high point in the sky. Dragging him along now would be akin to cooking him," he muttered under his breath, avoiding the stares directed his way.

"Smart." It was all the Persian said, but Will preened at the simplicity. He rarely received such an unabashed compliment from anyone.

"Thank you."

The tall man leaned to the other member of the militia, saying something in Persian. The man nodded and reached into his pack, pulling out a jar of what looked like—

"Is that piss?" one of the legionaries intoned with a grimace. "Why do you carry around a jar of piss?"

The militia soldier looked unimpressed. "Coconut milk and aloe. We don't have a great deal, but our men do not succumb to thirst as yours do. Our bodies are made for deserts."

Will thrilled at the knowledge. "Coconut milk? Truly?" He attempted to reign in his enthusiasm, but he had always enjoyed uncommon imports. One so rarely got to indulge as a soldier and to indulge as an immunes piqued his intellectual curiosity. "I've read studies on that. They say it soothes dehydration and boasts better nutrition than water. It's nearly impossible to come by if you're away from Italy."

The Persian appeared pleased by Will's excitement, taking the jar from his companion and handing it to the medic. "It will renew his strength at a much greater speed, you have my word."

"This is very generous of you," Will said hesitantly, not reaching for the bottle. "Are you certain you can spare it? You said you do not have much."

"And I also said we are desert men. We can afford the loss of one."

Will shot Valerian a questioning glance. He received a nod and took the jar with what he hoped was a respectful smile. "Thank you."

The Roman soldiers shifted on their feet, looking particularly ashamed of themselves for the way they had gone for their swords. There were mutterings among them and they seemed to come to an accord simultaneously, each nodding to the two men of the auxilia. The Persians watched the acknowledgment with interest, undoubtedly used to brash dismissal by the majority of the century.

Will let himself cling to a glimmer of hope that the two groups would one day be able to coexist. The desire was foreign to him. What did it matter to Will if the auxilia and century allied over more than coin? It ultimately had no impact on the field of battle. By all rights, there was no reason for the two groups to get along beyond that point.

His mind flickered over the moment in the garden with Hannibal.

Perhaps it was a selfish hope. If the century accepted the auxilia, Will would not be shunned should he take Hannibal up on his offer of friendship and tutorage.

He sighed and sat the jar next to his leg, reaching down to check the pulse of the sleeping legionary beside him. Only Lucas and Cimon knew of Hannibal's offer to train him. He had told the two of them because they were warriors. They valued wisdom in battle and therefore were the most likely to see reason for Will to accept the offer of training.

The others would require he take a more delicate tack.

Even Valerian, for all his acceptance of their tense partnership with the auxilia, would have qualms with Will wandering so freely among them.

Had the auxilia not been made up mostly of Persians, perhaps the issue would be lesser. As it was, they were on the verge of war with Persia. The wavering diplomatic relations were growing strained, which, in turn, strained the cohesion of the cohort.

It was an unfortunate time to have heritage.

The legionary beside Will started to stir and he immediately turned to him. "Welcome back," he said, trying to offer a comforting smile.

The young soldier looked terribly confused, dazed eyes going to the members of the auxilia and then to Valerian. "What happened?"

Will pitied him. He was a young boy. He couldn't have been older than eighteen and he had an even slimmer physique than Will himself. It was no wonder he had lost consciousness. "You fell victim to the sun, I'm afraid." He helped the soldier sit up and lean back against a tree. "You haven't been drinking enough water."

The legionary looked horrified. "This is embarrassing." He put his face in his hands, looking entirely humiliated. It was understandable. The younger men especially did not like to show weakness. They were still trying to prove their strength—earn their place. "I'm sorry."

"There is no reason to apologize," Valerian said firmly, crossing his arms. "You cannot stop your body from doing whatever it decides."

“It has only been a minor inconvenience,” Will assured him as he picked up the bottle of coconut milk. “Here, drink this.”

The soldier eyed it suspiciously. “What kind of medicine is this?”

“Not medicine at all. Coconut milk. These men from the auxilia brought it for us.” Will gestured up to the two Persians standing a few yards away. They shifted uncomfortably. “It will give you your strength back. Please, drink it.”

The legionary looked mistrustful, but he did as he was told, uncapping the bottle and taking a swallow. After a moment of consideration, it seemed he liked the taste and began drinking it in earnest.

Will took enough pity to not fault him for his lack of gratitude.

It wasn’t long before they were back on the road, the young soldier renewed by his rest and drink and the other men glad for the moment of stillness. The soldiers of the militia hung off to the side, avoiding walking directly with the men of the century.

Will frowned. It seemed the brief moment of unity had been temporary. It would have been foolish to expect otherwise.

Valerian and Will were walking behind the rest, keeping enough distance that their conversation would not be soaked up by gossiping ears.

“I think now is as good a time as any to bring up the fact that Cimon told me about the auxilia captain’s offer,” Valerian mentioned bluntly.

Will shot him a look, but Valerian did not look displeased. His expression was one of concern and curiosity. “I figured he might. I assume this means Jove knows as well?”

Valerian laughed, well aware that everyone thought of him and Jove as a singular unit. “I told him, yes. He likes the idea. It’s unique and unique things excite him.”

Will nodded, watching his greaves as they crunched on the dirt. “And you?”

“I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth.”

“Do you want to know the facts of it or why I am considering it?”

“The facts of it are plain. The auxilia captain offered to train you in reward for your assistance.” Valerian regarded him with interest. “You are not one to make controversial decisions, Will. What’s different about this?”

Will chewed his lip and considered his words carefully. Ultimately, he came to a decision. Perhaps he was inspired by Valerian’s relationship with Jove, but he thought that if anyone could understand, it would be the man next to him. He checked to see that they were far enough away from the other soldiers so as not to be overheard. “He has…” he sucked in a stabilizing breath. “Expressed interest.”

It seemed this had not been the response Valerian expected. “Truly? And is it returned?”

“Maybe. Yes. I don’t know.” Will kicked at a rock and hated how uncertain he sounded. “Yes. I feel like it might be returned.”

Valerian let out a shocked chuckle. “I always thought you stared at him so because he fascinated you. Apparently I was correct, in a way.”

Will blushed crimson. “Did I truly stare so often?”

“Mostly after a battle.” Valerian grinned. “Though I do not blame you. He is a terrifyingly compelling sight after battle.”

Will shivered. Hannibal after battle was like nothing he had ever seen. His dark skin would be covered in blood, eyes gleaming, and clothes often in tatters. He was wild—feral—and this was a large part of the reason Will had been so shocked by the demeanor of the man he had spent those companionable moments with. They truly seemed like two altogether different men.

“So this is the reason you wish to do this?” Valerian’s voice had taken a serious tone once more. “For interest?”

Will shook his head resolutely. “No. Not entirely, anyway. When he offered to train me, he seemed so utterly confident that I would learn from him.” He wrung his hands together, feeling the weight of his gladius on his hip. “Roman training has always been difficult for me. Perhaps trying a new method will finally allow me to be useful with more than just bandages.”

“Being useful with bandages is an irreplaceable skill, Will. Don’t ever think that you are useless.” Valerian reached over to squeeze Will’s shoulder as they walked. “Without you, countless men would be dead.”

“And without proper training, I will die before I can save more,” Will said bitterly. He was appreciative of the comfort, but a frustration had been boiling in the pit of his gut for years. He knew that he was far from useless, but he could not help but feel inferior. “I am seen as a weakling. I am tired of it, Valerian. I am very tired.”

Valerian sighed and hooked his thumbs in his chest plate. “I know. You are no weakling, Will, not by any stretch of the imagination.” He straightened his back as they spotted the century across the plains. It would take another half hour to reach them, but the land was flat and the view stretched miles. “But if you truly feel that this captain’s offer is genuine and not simply efforts towards his interest, I will endeavor to calm Caeso’s rage when he finds out.”

Will groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “Caeso would be displeased with me.”

“Caeso is your best friend in this world and is overprotective of you.”

“That much is true.”

“Don’t worry too much over him,” Valerian comforted. “If this truly turns out to be beneficial to you, Caeso will come around. He always does.”

Will nodded, mouth stretched in a thin line. “I hope you’re right.”

“I’m rarely wrong.”

They both laughed, settling into much lighter conversation from that point on. Soon, they were upon the century again, the two men from the militia breaking off and returning to the auxilia. Will had meant to thank them once more, but by the time he had turned around to do so, they were already gone.

“Where do we intend to camp?” Will asked as Valerian prepared to rejoin the officers.

“There is a gully a few hours south of here. There will be a sparing amount of water and if we set camp strategically we will not need to dig trenches all around.” Valerian made a gesture in demonstration. “We must keep our strength up, if the incident today with the recruit is any indication. The less labor needed to set camp, the better.”

Will made a sound of acknowledgment and waved him off. “Go, then. I won’t keep you. Thank you for staying back with me.”

“I wasn’t about to leave you to the wolves,” Valerian joked, waving as he reentered the mass.

It was another five hours before the century came to a halt at long last. Will’s legs burned and throat ached. He wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground and sleep for days, but a few more men had fallen victim to the heat before the day was out and he was required to assist them in the medical tent along with another immunes.

The other medic’s name was Orion. He was a decade Will’s senior and was the most austere person Will had ever encountered. He was a grump, a bastard, and he was a damn good medic.

“Get a damned compress on that one’s forehead before his face melts off the bone!” Orion shouted at Will, sounding far more exasperated than he needed to.

Will rolled his eyes, having grown accustomed to Orion’s acidity long ago. “I will.”

“And fetch more of the water before everyone withers away in here, boy,” Orion snapped. “What are you waiting for?”

Again, Will simply nodded and sighed. “I will.”

“Why have you fed this man bread? Do you wish to dry out his insides? Get figs when you get the water.”

“I will.”

“Stop repeating yourself, boy. Blast it, I’ll get the damn water myself.” And with that, Orion stormed out the tent.

One of the more coherent soldiers laughed, nibbling at the bread Will had given him. “Is he always so dramatic?”

“For as long as I’ve known him,” Will replied, shaking his head. He didn’t dislike Orion for his callousness. For all his edge and bitterness, he was one of the best men of healing Will had ever known. And if anyone was so skilled at saving a life, they couldn’t possibly be a bad person. Orion did what was right when it counted. That was all that mattered.

Will rubbed aloe over the scraped knee of a man who had tripped and fallen in the weakness of dehydration. The man hissed and flushed, trying to hide his pain. “This will ease the sting.”

“It’s fine,” the man grumbled.

“I know.”

Orion stormed back into the tent, arms filled with supplies. He shook Will off when he attempted to assist him. “Oh stop your fretting, Will. Go get something to eat. We are fine here.”

Will put his hands up in defeat. “Alright, Orion. Send for me if you need me.”

“Oh, go away and rest. You’re no good to us malnourished.”

Will knew that was the man’s way of showing he cared, so he took it in stride and left the tent as requested.

Only now that he had been stagnant for some time, he no longer felt hungry or tired. He felt anxious.

With the gully expanding along the entirety of one side of the camp, the trenches were nearly dug and camp set. The men were milling around now, preparing for guard duty or rest. The day was winding down, the night beginning to cool, and Will felt entirely off kilter.

His eyes wandered to the auxilia down the slope of the hill. He wavered, thinking back on Hannibal’s invitation to visit him. Once again he felt the nagging doubt that his presence was truly desired. Hannibal could have changed his mind by now. He may have decided that Will wasn’t worth the effort.

Will rubbed his face. He knew that he was only being self-deprecating. Hannibal had made his intentions and interest clear. There was no room for doubt where that was concerned.

The only doubt resided within Will’s own mind.

Steeling himself, he began making his way towards the auxilia’s camp. If there was one benefit to being a self-proclaimed pariah, it was the fact that no one seemed to bat an eye at Will as he passed. No one questioned where he was going or why. He was as a ghost, sliding through the field of his comrades like a breeze to be shrugged off and ignored.

It made everything much easier.

Few of the militia paid him any heed when he stepped into their camp and he rubbed at his arms awkwardly. He had absolutely no idea where Hannibal was and this was beginning to feel like a fool's errand. He turned to look at the hills that led up to the century's camp. The auxilia had settled themselves along a mire created by the river of the gorge. It seemed that trees were their primary resource for shelter.

The mire overlapped a small forest, the brush a great deal thicker than it had been near Ancyra. It was a good indication that they were drawing near the marshlands. Will did not look forward to trudging through muck and slime where the plains diverged into swamp, but it could not be helped. Thankfully, the swamplands stretched a shorter distance than they had ten years prior. The land was heating and drying. Soon, it would all be temperate plains.

He was about to turn back and chalk the whole experience up to his more impulsive qualities when he heard someone call out to him.

"You there! Roman."

Will turned, feeling his heart skip. The associations with being called out by country rather than name held connotations that did not lead to comfort. Were they going to expel him from the camp? Had he overstepped his bounds? He met the eyes of the Persian calling to him, relaxing when he realized it was the man from earlier in the day. "Oh, hello."

"The captain is that way," the Persian said, jutting his thumb back into the trees towards the dim light of a fire peeking through the dense branches. "He told me to send you if you came. You've come, so I'm sending you." He didn't seem curious as to why Hannibal would request Will in the first place and Will was grateful for the disinterested respect of privacy.

"What is your name?" Will asked the question before he could think better of it. There was a chance the man would be displeased at the intrusion, but they had spoken to one another twice in that day and Will felt it only polite to ask.

The man looked surprised, but not offended. "Bahadur," he replied. "And yours?"

"Will."

Bahadur nodded. "The captain is that way, Will." And he walked away.

Will felt relaxed by the neutrality of the other man. Some of the nervousness he had felt previously slipped away. Deciding it would be pointless to turn back now, he walked in the direction Bahadur had indicated, dodging branches and brambles as he vainly tried to avoid the squelching mud that filled the mire.

Hannibal had set his fire on a dry stretch of land in the forest. He was surrounded by the potent earthy smell of the marsh and Will inhaled the scent appreciatively. He looked up when he heard Will approaching and an impressive smile slid onto his features. Will froze at the smile, taken aback by how pleased Hannibal seemed to be at the sight of him.

Hannibal's face calmed and he serenely waved Will over. "I'm happy to see you finally decided to join me," he said, picking through a pile of twigs to find branches dry enough to

feed the fire.

“It’s why you sent your men, isn’t it?” Will sat down a couple feet away from the other man, not sure where they stood with one another. “To remind me you were here.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at that, obviously impressed by Will’s perception. “I’ll admit that was one of the reasons, yes. Do you find that inappropriate of me?”

Will pursed his lips and fought back a smile. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Hannibal chuckled. “Yes, you are.” His eyes roamed over Will’s face as though drinking in the sight of him and Will blushed, ducking his head away. Hannibal eventually let up, turning back to the fire. “And what decisions do you bring with you?”

“I’d like for you to train me. I’ve spoken to a few of my friends and though some are cautious, the mutual agreement seems to be that it would benefit me to learn a better defense.”

“And have you told them of anything else?” The question didn’t push, but the meaning was there.

Will rubbed the back of his neck, glancing over at the older man. “I…” he let out a soft sigh. “I mentioned it to one of them. He was not averse, but he is concerned for me.”

“Understandable.” Hannibal did not balk at the mention of Valerian’s concern. “And when would you like to begin your training? We camp daily and I have nothing of import to do during such nights.”

There was a secret relief that rest in Will when Hannibal didn’t ask him of his own feelings towards their relationship. He had yet to decide what he wanted there. Training was as good a place as any to allow him space to translate his own mind. “Whenever you would like. As immunes, the only duty required of me during a pause is to tend to any ill or injured. As of now, we only have a few malnourished or dehydrated. Nothing that requires extensive attention.”

Hannibal nodded and made a sound of understanding. He threw another branch to the fire and they both listened to it crackle. “This environment is not particularly conducive to training.”

Will looked around at the land. Save for a few dry patches here and there, the forest was made up entirely of soggy marshland and closely grown trees. Hannibal was right. This was no place to train. “Should I come back another night?”

“I’d prefer you stayed,” Hannibal replied plainly. He made no effort to be coy, meeting Will’s eyes dead on. “My desire for your company does not limit to training, Will. I would enjoy your company whether or not I had a sword in my hand.”

Will chewed his lip and nodded, lying back on the ground to stare up at the dark clouds of branches above them. He could barely see the sky. “Do you ever get tired of moving around constantly?”

Hannibal seemed to consider the question for a moment, shifting closer to Will so he could look down into his face. “Not entirely. I’ve no place to stop my movements, so continuing onward seems as amenable an idea as any.”

“You’ve no home?” Will looked up into Hannibal’s dark eyes. He supposed he could have little room for surprise at that. Will didn’t have a home either. His father’s farm had been long since sold off. Until his twenty years of service was done and he was rewarded with his own land, Will had no home to return to either.

Hannibal simply shook his head. “I see no use for homes. They serve only as a place to allow yourself to rot.”

“I don’t agree.”

A raised brow. “Oh?”

Will chuckled nervously, ashamed of his own candor. “What I meant to say is that I don’t feel that way. Home is somewhere you can be yourself without expectations of others. You can do as you wish. You are only who you wish to be.”

“When you put it like that, home seems much more pleasant,” Hannibal assented. “You have a lovely view of things.”

“Some people would call it naïve.”

“Naivety can be refreshing every now and then, but I do not find you to be very naïve, Will.”

There it was, that peculiar way in which his name fell across Hannibal’s tongue. Will shivered. “You haven’t known me for long.”

“On the contrary, I have known you for years.” At Will’s confused look, Hannibal smirked. “Though we never spoke, we have known of one another. The way a person carries themselves, moves, fights, interacts, these are all things that define a person just as strongly as words. Seeing a man on the battlefield speaks multitudes to his person and I have seen you on the battlefield a great many times.”

Will snorted. “Then you must have my definition as one of weakness and stumbling.”

“No.” Hannibal leaned over until Will was forced to meet his eyes. “Your definition has formed into one of bravery, selflessness, and grace. You dodge blows that most men would meet their end by. You rush into chaos and death without blinking to save the lives of men you barely know. I see no fear in you in those moments and certainly no weakness.”

Hannibal waved a hand through the air, gesturing at nothing in particular. “It’s one of the reasons I know you could be an excellent fighter. Not all warriors find their strength in muscle and grit. Some of the deadliest men I’ve known were slight and quick. Roman training focuses on strength and brute force. For someone like you, this training is pointless.”

Will pondered over Hannibal’s words. They made a great deal more sense than his self-conscious thoughts wished to admit. “So you intend to focus on my agility then? Turn my

size from a weakness?"

"Precisely." Hannibal stared at the fire. "Persians do not fight by barreling through with shields and pilums. Our moves require finesse and calculation. I think you will find yourself more suited to these ways."

Will had nothing to say at that. The words the captain spoke were validated a thousand times over by what Will had seen with his own two eyes. Watching the auxilia fight was like watching the spirals of water in a river. Their movements were fluid and graceful. Each swipe of their sword hit a mark that devastated rather than simply continuing the assault until the enemy fell. A Persian could take a man down with one blow, if they so desired, with relative ease.

This was not to say that Roman warriors were inferior. Had that been the case, they would have lost far more battles than they had won. They merely fought differently. If the Persians were waves, the Romans were the rocks those waves crashed against.

Will started when he felt a palm press on the chest plate of his lorica segmentata. Hannibal was peering down at him, hand casually resting on the metal.

"Your men fight with their center out of here," Hannibal said softly. He added pressure to make his point. "Their weight is held in the chest, which boasts to admirable upper body strength. Their fight is in the arms." He slid his hand lower, pressing into the soft leather of the tunic over Will's stomach.

Will's breath caught in his throat and his skin flushed. He didn't move, eyes locked on Hannibal's.

"You should fight from here," Hannibal continued. His voice was a low rumble. "Your center should be in your stomach, focusing on balance and the strength of your legs."

Will swallowed roughly, expecting Hannibal to remove his hand. When he did not, Will's legs shifted restlessly on the ground. He could feel the warmth of the hand through his clothing. "Is that how you fight? Your center there?"

Hannibal's fingers flexed minutely, drawing a shiver from the young man on the ground. "I fight from whichever center suits my purpose." He watched Will quietly for a moment. "When I train you, do not wear your armor. The metal will weigh you down."

Will gave a weak sound of acknowledgement, all attention focused on the hand still resting on his belly. He heaved a sigh of relief when Hannibal finally moved away. The sensation had been overwhelming. He shut his eyes and willed the redness in his cheeks to leave. He was astonished at how easily Hannibal could work him into a fever.

The legionary needed something to distract him; anything. He blurted out the first words that came to mind. "Tell me something about you."

Hannibal's gaze turned to one of surprise. "What do you wish to know?"

Will rubbed the heel of his palm into his forehead, willing focus back to him. “Tell me of an event in your life that stands out.”

The laugh Will was met with rung into the trees. “You wish for me to tell you a story?”

The expression that adorned Will’s face then was one he would fervently deny was a pout. “If you don’t wish to—“

“No, no.” Hannibal held up his hands, lying down alongside Will to stare at the canopy of trees. “Very well. Let me think.”

Will shut his eyes and let his breathing slow. Lying down side by side like this was reminiscent of his days as a child. He had a friend from a neighboring farm who would hike with him every time they got the chance. At night, they would rest in the grass next to one another and watch the stars. The déjà vu was peaceful.

“When I first came to Rome, decades ago, I was much younger than you,” Hannibal began. The deep lull of his voice carried into the air alongside the smoke of the fire.

Will contemplated this. If that was the case, Hannibal was likely a great deal older than he was now. He pushed away the sense of propriety that threatened his conscience.

“I was young and angry and filled with nothing more than a desire to rip the world apart.” Hannibal took in a slow breath, allowing Will to process the frank admission. “I travelled alone for some time, doing petty jobs for small bits of coin. I did not know your language then and as I roamed further into your borders, I found that fewer and fewer spoke mine. It was a very frustrating way to live.”

“You didn’t come here as a mercenary?” Will hadn’t anticipated such a truth. He had a difficult time envisioning Hannibal as anything other than what he was at that very moment in time.

“No, I didn’t. I was simply a young man who had run away from one difficult life and into another.” Hannibal did not offer the story on his previous life and Will did not ask. “Somehow I made it as far as Byzantium and it was there that I encountered more than traders and farmers. There, I encountered soldiers, scholars, and the types of society a city brings. For the first time since I had ventured over Roman borders, I was intrigued.”

Will nodded. He had been to Byzantium many times. After it had been rebuilt by emperor Septimus Severus, the city was a flourishing unit of defense. It was declared one of the most defensible cities of the empire and there had even been controversial talk of changing to Byzantium as the capital. There was far too much discontent among the nobles at such a notion. The idea had only been entertained.

“The militial nature of Byzantium, coupled with an ocean the glittered like jewels, gave me inspiration in my youth. I felt invigorated and I stayed there for quite some time.” Hannibal’s voice was slow and steady. Will struggled to keep his eyes open despite the cadence. “I encountered a librarian of sorts who took me in. He and his apprentice had been targeted by thieves at the time, as he possessed many valuable tomes. In exchange for my protection,

they taught me your language, fed me, and housed me. I will forever be grateful to him and his charge both."

The sad lilt of Hannibal's voice caught Will's attention. "What happened?"

"He died," was the simple response. "I had been away at the time and doing something pointless. Robbers came at him and demanded his tomes. He refused, incited their rage, and they stabbed him. He was alive when I returned, but the hour was late and no medic could come in time. It was unfortunate. His apprentice had all but vanished. I searched for him but it was a fruitless endeavor. I'm left to assume he was killed as well."

Will's heart sank in his chest. He could only imagine how terrible that must have been. Hannibal had been completely alone. The only people to have shown him kindness and offered him solace had been ripped away. Will understood the desolation such a thing could inspire in a man. "I'm sorry."

"We live and we die," Hannibal muttered solemnly. "I blamed myself for a time, but it was a foolish blame. You cannot control your fate or anyone else's. It is idiocy to try."

"That does not mean you cannot lament the loss."

"I lamented it many years ago. It's but an old scar now," Hannibal lifted his arm to look at it. "And I have many others."

Will reached out to trace a thick scar along Hannibal's forearm. It was rough and angry and stood stark against the other man's rich skin. "This one?"

Hannibal allowed Will his exploration, letting his arm hang there. "A battle four years back. I lost footing and the decision was to take the blow to my arm or my face. I found the arm preferable."

"It's a miracle you did not lose it." Will took his hand away, belatedly realizing himself.

"It is." Hannibal's arm fell back to his chest. "In truth, I should be dead or maimed many times over, but I am still here. Against the gods' intentions."

"You think they intended your death?"

"I think many have intended my death. None have succeeded."

Will grinned at that, feeling a burst of satisfaction in his chest. "I am pleased that is the case. Otherwise I would be lying here talking to myself and people might be disturbed even moreso by me."

"What about you could possibly be disturbing?" Hannibal inquired, leaning up onto his elbow to give Will a look of disbelief.

Will shrugged, a movement hindered by his current position. "I'm not entirely certain. I am different from the rest of the men here. I am small and I prefer books to blood. My namesake is unpleasant and my manner can be…" He bit his lip. "Considered rude at times."

“People dislike your openness,” Hannibal observed thoughtfully. “The way you speak your mind.”

“I don’t always speak, but when I allow myself to, I tend to spit out whatever is at the forefront of my thoughts. It has gotten me into trouble on more than one occasion.”

“I enjoy your transparency. Ulterior motives sour conversation.”

“Most people prefer a level of decorum to transparency.”

“I am not most people and neither are you.” Hannibal said this with such a firm tone that Will paused to look at him, wondering if he had angered him in some way.

“Have I upset you?”

Hannibal’s expression immediately softened. “No. I find myself unimpressed by the ignorance of your compatriots.”

“I suppose I have just grown accustomed to it,” Will admitted.

“Shall I tell you another story?” Hannibal lowered himself back to the ground, shifting so that he was closer still. His shoulder rest softly against Will’s and Will found that he had no desire to move away.

Will smiled and shut his eyes once more. “I would enjoy that.”

Chapter End Notes

Byzantium was later known as Constantinople and is now Istanbul. There is your random fact of the day.

I hope you all are enjoying the general peacefulness of these first few chapters. Enjoy it while you can.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> "I've never been entirely comfortable with the idea that one human being could own another. I find it tasteless and arrogant."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Put your back into it!"

Will grumbled under his breath, many of the men around him doing the same. The day was drowning in heat, coating everyone in sweat and foul tempers.

They had seen the smoke long before they reached the source; billowing black clouds that poured into the sky. Their pace had been doubled, officers demanding haste to discover the cause of the chaos.

It had been a sight that carried the grandiosity of mother nature. The burning heat of the fire hit their faces like a slap. The smoke stung their eyes and made their mouths taste like ash. The century had stumbled in awe, watching as the fire ate away the fields of the farmlands that speckled the border of Tarsus.

Screams for help had spurred them into action.

Soot-blackened farmers and their crying children had come begging and pleading for the soldiers to help. They claimed the dry heat of the day had sparked like tinder upon their fields, drawing flames up before they could so much as draw a breath of surprise. The fire had eaten nearly half the crops already and should it continue, starvation would be of great concern to Tarsus in the coming winter.

Caeso had seen fit to act, knowing his duty as a man of Rome.

Will admired him for the call. Many a legatus would continue on, stating that the despair of a few dirty farmers was none of their concern. Luckily, Caeso was no such legatus. Will knew with an unfortunate settling of worry that Caeso would likely be disciplined for the decision. They were a great deal overdue for their arrival to Antioch now. Perhaps Caeso had simply decided that the lateness would be cuffed regardless, so the pause could surely do no additional harm.

The century had been at it for nearly two hours now and had finally succeeded in taming the fires down to smoldering embers.

Will was covered with dirt and soot and he faltered every few moments to cough wetly at the smoke that had lined his throat. He used the wooden scoop in his hand to bring more soil from the earth, throwing it onto the embers to suffocate the remaining heat. He wiped his wrist over his brow in an effort to clear it of sweat, only succeeding in turning the dirt and ash to paste against his skin.

He glanced around. The legionaries surrounding him were faring no better. He had been surprised to find the auxilia rushing forward when they had moved to quell the flames. The rescue of the farmland had been one of a unified effort; soldiers, militia, and farmhands all working together to fight nature's fury.

Despite the exhaustion and filth that now coated him, Will had felt warmed by the harmony inspired from desperation.

Another glance saw Cimon and Tertius across the smoking field, heaping piles of dirt over the burning land. Yet another found Caeso and Valerian speaking with the farmers of their lost crops, Jove and an unfamiliar soldier trying to calm the children. Will continued his exploration to see Lucas had drawn near him, grumbling and rubbing dirt on his knees in some kind of grumpy fit as he kicked at the embers to silence them. Will smiled and turned, peering through the heat and stench of ravaged crops to witness Hannibal many yards off beside three men.

Will frowned, squinting to understand the scene. Hannibal was joined by another of his auxilia, both inspecting the men before them—made up of two legionaries and one of the militia—who were squirming and wincing in pain. When Will glimpsed Orion carrying a pack towards them, the pieces fell into place. He handed his dish to a nearby soldier and carefully made his way through the wrecked fields towards the men.

The scene fell into full clarity as he drew near. The men were burned. Will grimaced and adjusted the strap of his medical pack over his shoulder. There was little they could do for burns. They would be painful no matter what the medics attempted in their healing.

Hannibal appeared surprised by his approach, stepping back from the men to allow Will room to stand next to Orion. Will nodded to him, but did not smile. The smell of burned flesh overrode pleasantries.

"These men got the worst of it," Hannibal said somberly. His arms were crossed over the leather breast of his armor, regarding the scene with the detached acceptance of a veteran soldier. "There are a few with minor burns, but my medics are tending to them with aloe and honey alongside the rest of yours."

Will nodded. Burns were vicious and unforgiving things. The fire did not distinguish between Roman and Persian skin. Fire licked and grasped whatever was within its reach. As such, the allegiances of the medics mattered little. There were men who would be in great bouts of pain for the days to come and they would need tending to.

Ultimately, a soldier was a soldier, and they needed all soldiers at their best.

Will regarded the men's wounds, gently touching the unmarred skin edging the burned and peeling flesh as the men hissed and shivered.

"I think resin rather than honey," he suggested offhandedly to Orion, opening his bag. "For the deeper burns."

Orion considered this with a smacking of his lips as he poured water over the men's raw skin to clean it of dirt, forcing one of them to sit back down when he tried to flee the pain. "Stop that," he snapped. "Yes, but use the resin sparingly. An excess will bring no benefits."

Will nodded and gingerly lifted the arm of the man closest to him. "Where does it hurt the most?" he asked soothingly. He had always had a way with the injured. They found him calming and safe, as he had been told many times over. His ability to mollify the men was one of the reasons he was kept in the first cohort as a ranking immunes.

The man winced through watering eyes and indicated the blackened flesh by his elbow, looking away immediately as though sickened by his own body. "It doesn't hurt the most here. I can't feel it at all." Will felt sympathy as he spread aloe around the lighter burns, trying to keep his touch as light as possible. The man shivered and twitched, but did not pull his arm away. Will commended his sturdiness mentally.

"That's normal. Your body is in shock, but I'll make it easier." Will knew better than to make promises of recovery and success. To promise a wounded soldier his injuries would heal entirely was to bring crushing hope upon them when the injuries did no such thing.

The only time Will made promises to a soldier was if he knew without hesitance that the soldier was going to die.

He pulled the resin from his pack, relieved that he had thought to keep some along. Resin was not the ideal treatment, but it would do well enough to coat the deepest burns and protect them from infecting air and dirt. Had he been in a city, he would have used salves or lotions, but in the midst of nothing but fields and plains, resin was the best option. It hardened enough that movement would not hinder it and it was ideal for travel.

The only trouble being that it was incredibly painful to remove the resin when needing to be redressed, but the healing properties outweighed the unpleasant end.

Will gently led the man to lie down and ensured that he had linen laid out below his arm. People often passed out during burn treatment, knocking their heads and injuring themselves further.

"Please brace yourself. This will bring you discomfort." Will's composure was steady and mild and the man seemed to take comfort in it.

When Will moved to spread the resin over the crinkling flesh of the burn, the man shocked against his will, reflexively trying to jerk upwards. Will was about to restrain him when two large hands were pressing into the soldier's shoulders and holding him to the ground. Startled, Will looked up and came face to face with Hannibal.

That captain regarded him coolly. “Allow me.”

Will frowned. “You aren’t required to assist. Surely you are needed elsewhere.”

“He is my man and you cannot dress his wounds and restrain him simultaneously. I will remain.” Hannibal’s tone brooked no argument.

Will looked down at the man under his care in surprise. He hadn’t realized he was a man of the auxilia. All he had paid attention to was the burns and the pain. The fact of whether or not he had been a Roman soldier held no weight to him. He felt irrationally as though he should be embarrassed by this oversight. He shook away the feeling and returned to work, not willing to leave the man to suffer as he introspected.

One of the injured legionaries nearby let out a cry of pain and the Persian jerked again in fear. Hannibal held him steady.

Will began applying the viscous liquid to the burn once more, smoothing it over flesh that had already begun to bubble and peel. The man hissed through his teeth and tears slid past his temples. Will instinctively pressed a hand to the man’s forehead, shushing him gently. “Almost done. Not long now.”

When the resin was spread, Will grabbed a roll of bandages and wrapped them loosely around the man’s arm. Unlike gashes and cuts, bandages on burns could not cling tightly to the skin. They served more as a barrier to the outside world rather than a wall to keep more from spilling forth.

As he finished, Hannibal loosened his grip on the man and the man lay panting, eyes to the sky. When Will was satisfied he needed no further treatment, he grabbed his pack and moved to the second of the three soldiers. With Orion tending to the extensive burns of the third, this was the last man who needed help.

This man had a vicious burn up his calf and knee.

“I-I tried to move, but the flames leapt out at me,” the man whispered, voice quaking with tremors. “As though they wished to pull me in.”

“But you weren’t pulled in,” Will reassured him, applying aloe to the outlines of the burn. “You are here and you are alright.” Will was well aware the psychological effects of burns. Years ago, there had been a fire in a town near where his century was camped. The blaze licked the heavens that night and screams filled the air. Will would never forget the stench of rotting flesh and the wide and hollow eyes of the people who survived the inferno. Nothing shocked the mind quite like a flame. “I’ll take care of you now.”

The man calmed, somewhat, and fell back when Will directed him to. Once again, Hannibal’s large hands came into view and Will looked up with a furrowed brow. “He is not yours.”

Hannibal stared back at him, nonplussed. “So desperate for me to go, are you? You need assistance, Will.”

Will paled at the use of his name, an absurd fear welling within him to be revealed as familiar with the captain of the auxilia among his comrades. He stomped the emotion away viciously. There was no call for shame and he would not allow himself the pettiness of it. “Thank you, Hannibal.”

As though Hannibal recognized Will’s acceptance of public knowledge by the simple declaration of a name, his face softened and his stare became one of warmth. Will avoided his gaze.

Will began the application of resin anew. The burn was much larger here and it took time, earning him an involuntary kick to the gut in the process. The man was too beside himself to apologize, but Will saw fit not to hold him accountable for such things. What one did under the influence of agony could not be helped.

By the time the man’s leg was tended and bandaged, he had fallen unconscious. Will was grateful for the small mercy. This man would wish he was unconscious many times to come in the following days. Best he take the rest when he could.

It was another hour before the chaos had calmed enough for Caeso regroup the century once more. Though slightly worse for wear, they set back on the path to Tarsus, stomping across the ashen ruins of the farmland and blocking the despairing sobs of the farmers from their minds. They had done what they could. They could not linger.

With no river nearby in which to clean themselves and their water stores in short supply, most of the men looked a sight. They were covered in soot and debris. Blackened skin and smeared armor consumed them in shadowed colors.

Will had lost track of Hannibal after treating the burned soldiers and try as he might to locate the enigmatic man, he succeeded only in finding Tertius and Cimon. He ignored his disappointment.

“Nothing like angry acts of nature!” Tertius barked out with a laugh. “Had me and Helvetia here running scared.”

Will marveled at how he could look at almost anything with a smile on his face. “Could have used Helvetia to help dig up soil faster.”

Tertius let out a mock gasp. “Perish the thought. I would never treat my lady in such a way.”

Cimon grunted. “Those farmers will suffer this winter. You know the city will demand most of their stock, regardless of the fire.”

Tertius shrugged, aiming to appear undisturbed. “It’s the way of things. We cannot control such things, Cimon. The farmers know this just as well as you or I.”

“We helped them,” Will said, chewing his lip as he tried to push the concern for the farmers behind him. He would never encounter them again. He would likely never learn of their fate. To dwell would do his sanity a disservice. “We did what we could. I grew up on a farm. Farmers are resourceful.”

Cimon gave Will a broad smile, sighing. “You’re right, Will. Life is full of trials. I’m certain they will overcome.”

None of them were certain, but they maintained the pretense anyway.

“I must ask you, Will,” Tertius started impishly. He swung his arms behind his back and gave Will an ash-streaked smile. “That man who was assisting you with the burned soldiers. He looked awfully familiar.”

Will groaned and rubbed at his face, continually forgetting it only worsened the smear of soot. “I knew you’d say something. I just knew.”

“Did you now?” Tertius seemed positively tickled. “Why would you be so preoccupied by the thought, I wonder?”

Will levelled the other man with a glare as they walked. “Oh stop pretending as though they haven’t spoken to you of it already. You wouldn’t have asked otherwise.” He turned the glare to Cimon expectantly.

Cimon held up his hands in surrender. “I admit it. I could not restrain myself.”

“To be fair,” Tertius added, elbowing Will in the side playfully. “He held his tongue quite well until we spotted you conversing with the fellow. Not often do you see officers helping out an immunes with the wounded unless in dire straits, even auxilia officers.”

“Especially auxilia officers,” Cimon interjected.

“You’re not helping, Cimon,” Will grumbled.

“Sorry.”

“Truly, though, Will.” Tertius elbowed him again—gentler and with a hovering question. “He told me you’ve befriended him. Is that so?”

Will rolled his tongue in his mouth and thought on the question. “I suppose so, yes. I would consider he and I to be friendly.”

Tertius raised his eyebrows at that and Will immediately regretted his choice of words. “How friendly?”

“As friends are.” Will waved an insisting hand in gesticulation. “Of mutual respect and intellectual interest. Did Cimon speak of his offer to train me?”

Tertius made a surprisingly pleased sound. “He did. I think the idea is splendid.”

Will had not anticipated the response. “You do?”

“I do. I didn’t initially, but Cimon brought me around to his thinking well enough.”

Will turned again to Cimon, curious.

Cimon wrapped his arm around Will's shoulder and gave him a half hug, causing them both to stumble as they trekked forward. He laughed and released the smaller man to allow for balance. "I told him that I would let Hades himself train you should it keep you alive for the years to come."

Will felt his chest go tight with sentiment. "Referencing the Greeks now?"

"I've always fancied their gods. They know how to have fun."

"That's one way to put it, I suppose." Will shook his head and chuckled.

"Cimon had a point, though." Tertius' voice pulled over their laughter and they fell silent. "I see more reasons for benefit than catastrophe, but even more than that," he ducked his head, keeping pace as he met Will's eyes. "You are a grown man and as much as many of us wish to coddle you for that adorable smile alone, there is no denying you are capable of making your own decisions. I've never known you to be foolish, Will. Far from it."

Will smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Tertius. Valerian's reaction was quite similar. He seems to trust me to make this call."

"As he should," Cimon stated decisively. "You are the smartest of us, in my opinion. Were we to mistrust your mind, we would find ourselves unable to trust any mind at all."

"That feels like slight exaggeration." Will was trying not to grin.

"What are friends for if not to shower you with undeserving compliments?"

"I'm concerned," Will admitted. He hadn't wanted to stray from the comradery of the conversation, but the situation was becoming more unavoidable. "Caeso. He's the only one who doesn't know of the situation. I feel as though it has taken on much more weight than necessary."

"It's no small thing, I suppose." Tertius had his hands tucked into his tunic comfortably. The night was beginning to crawl towards them. They would likely be out in the chill for hours before they could set camp. The fire had set them too far behind. "Not common for a legionary to receive outside training. It could turn some heads, certainly."

Cimon grunted and put a comforting hand on Will's shoulder. "Not enough to warrant concern."

Will rubbed at his arms. He knew full well that there would be whispers among the ranks if he began training with a Persian, but there was no regulation against such conduct and he had no worry for punishment. "I'm more concerned with Caeso. The reactions of the other officers don't entirely concern me. It's nothing they would deem punishable."

"If Caeso is your concern then speak with him."

"You say that as though it's simple."

Tertius shook his head. “It is. The two of you are nearly brothers. He will not be pleased, no, but do you truly believe he would not support you should you ask it of him?”

Will sunk in upon himself, crushed by his own epiphany of guilt. Tertius’ words saw a sense Will had not yet allowed of himself. He knew he had not given Caeso the credit of character he deserved in his considerations. He had been so focused on his own fear of rejection that he had created a judge out of someone undeserving of the title. Caeso was a severe man, to be certain, but he had always had a soft spot for Will.

They had been by each other’s side for eleven years. The others had been pulled between centuries for a time before they were reunited, but Caeso and Will had remained solidly together. Caeso was the only family Will had.

He felt horrible that he had not spoken to him sooner. “I think I should seek him out. Have you seen him?”

Cimon clapped him on the back, sending Will off balance. “I knew you had it in you! I’d wager he’s at the front of formation.”

“I saw him at the east flank last,” Tertius offered helpfully. “Do us all a favor and let poor Caeso out of the dark, Will you? It’s making this whole debacle seem much more devious than it is.”

Will nodded and weaved his way through the soldiers at a steady pace. At eighty men, it wouldn’t be too difficult to locate Caeso. His armor would stand out amongst the rest. Officers needed to be recognizable to their charges in the heat of battle. It drew the attention of enemies and that made Will nervous for both Caeso and Valerian, but both men were capable warriors. They were officers for a reason, after all. Seniority did not automatically earn rank.

True to expectation, it did not take long to recognize the deep reds of the legatus uniform. Before he could lose his nerve, Will jogged to catch up to Caeso’s stride. He fell in step beside the other man, who reacted to his appearance with a startled smile.

“Well hello, Will!” Caeso tapped his arm in a gesture of affection. “What brings you to my side on this particularly,” he lifted his soot-covered arms and grimaced. “Adventurous evening?”

Will snickered and looked at his own filthy arms in turn. “That’s one word, I suppose. I know you’re tired, but I was wondering if you would be willing to speak with me as we walk.”

Caeso’s smile turned into a perplexed frown. Will did not often make such requests and they both knew each other well enough to understand when something was unusual. “Of course.” He moved to weave them out of the fray, ahead and to the side of the path so as to maintain a sense of privacy in their conversation. “Is everything alright, Will?”

Will observed his friend and commander. Caeso looked positively exhausted. He had long since removed his helmet and his vibrant red hair was matted with the grime from the scorched farmlands. His eyes were strained with the concerns of command—of their

tardiness and likely of their inability to help the farmers further, among what Will assumed to be a multitude of additional concerns.

“I’ve kept something from you,” Will said honestly. He had no desire to be diffident or misleading with Caeso; not now that he had finally decided to speak to him. “I was unsure of how you would react and so I have neglected honesty.”

Caeso’s frown deepened but he said nothing, waiting for Will to continue.

Will came to the conclusion that the best approach was a direct one. “I’ve spent some time with the auxilia’s commander.”

Caeso was so taken aback that he nearly tripped over his own greaves. “That was unexpected. I don’t know what I expected, but it was certainly not that.”

He didn’t sound angry yet and Will took that as a good sign. “That day when the recruit attacked the militia soldier, I tended to the soldier.”

Caeso nodded, eyes narrowed as he tried to make connections. “I am aware.”

“Hannibal, the auxilia’s captain, made an effort to thank me for doing so.” Will took a deep breath, begging his mind to allow the best words for the tale. “We had a conversation and found we enjoyed one another’s company. So, as an offer of gratitude, he suggested he train me in his manner of swordsmanship.”

Caeso was staring straight ahead, lips pressed into a tight line as he absorbed the information. “I see.”

Will was beginning to worry that Caeso was reacting more poorly than he had hoped. In a hasty attempt to save the discussion, Will spoke again. “I believe his offer is a genuine one and the others agree that it could benefit me to try another tactic. I could learn to properly defend myself.”

“The others?” Will winced at the hurt looked that flashed across Caeso’s face. “You’ve told the others but held me in the dark?”

Will felt his heart sink. “It’s not as it sounds, Caeso.” He ran a hand through his hair, not caring how it dirtied. “It was your reaction that held the most weight for me. I hesitated to speak to you because you, more than anyone, hold power over me with your opinions.”

The hurt faded slightly from Caeso’s countenance, giving way to fondness and concern. “If you are so concerned for my opinion, this offer of… Hannibal’s,” he paused as though to test the weight of Hannibal’s name from his lips. “His offer must be rather enticing to you. Do you truly desire training so desperately or is there more to this?”

“There’s more to this.” Will had responded with such automatic honesty that he paled. The words had come out of their own accord. He was so accustomed to speaking openly with Caeso that it hadn’t occurred to him to restrain the topic. “That is to say…” He trailed off and bit his lip.

Caeso looked at him for a long while after that. Will could nearly feel the other man's thoughts manifesting physically through the gaze. He endured it.

When Caeso spoke, it was quiet and neutral. "There are intentions, then?"

"I suppose there are, yes."

"Yours or his?" There was a steely edge to the question—protective.

"Both." There was little purpose to denial now.

Caeso's shoulders relaxed minutely. "So the training is a farce, then?"

Will shook his head emphatically. "No, no. Not at all! It was a genuine offer. I want to try. I want to end my weakness."

Caeso looked entirely affronted at this. "You are not weak, Will."

"As a warrior? Yes, I am. There is no arguing it." Will shrugged, the metal of his armor clinking dully. "I have never been able to fight as you do. Hannibal suggested it was because Roman training focuses on strength rather than agility. He intends to set my speed to advantage, rather than my brawn."

"That is not an unwise concept."

Will knew that was as close as Caeso would come to saying anything positive in reference to Hannibal. He accepted it in stride. "He makes a compelling argument and I would be remiss if I did not attempt it. I would be lying if I told you I do not feel inferior at times, Caeso." He rubbed the back of his neck, averting his eyes at the admission.

"I've known you felt that way. I've tried to dissuade it."

"I know."

Caeso let out a heaving sigh; sounding much like defeat. "If you think it beneficial to you and you think him honest, you'll get no argument from me." He held his hand up when Will moved to speak. "But if he so much as twitches towards you in a fashion I find unfitting, I will have his head from his neck. Make no mistake."

Will let out a sharp laugh of relief and amusement. "I've no doubt of that, but in the short time I've known him, he has treated me especially well. I don't think you have cause for concern."

"There is always cause for concern," Caeso replied cynically. "Just be wise with the steps you take, Will. Err on the side of caution."

Will nodded. "Alright. I will."

"Alright."

Though Caeso retained some modicum of tension for the remainder of their travels, he made no further mention of Will's accord with Hannibal. They had fallen into the lull of reminiscence, speaking of the times when they had first enlisted into the legion. They spoke of simpler days that were devoid of blood and death. They avoided the subject of Persia entirely, content for the time being to stick within memory and youth. Reality would find them soon enough. There was no reason to seek it out.

Will found himself suitably complacent by the time camp was being set. The night had fallen an hour prior and the cold air was a stark contrast to the violent heat of the day.

They had lucked upon a splintered river cutting through a forested bog. Water spiked off into hundreds of tiny and fading brooks, spiraling through the wetlands and past the trees. The land gave ample opportunity to wash themselves of soot and soil.

Will grabbed the chance as he saw it and ventured into the woods, making displeased sounds as his greaves were sucked in by the peat. Dead plants and wet moss scented the air here and Will's head spun with the odor. He grinned when he found his objective, however.

One of the brooks had diverged here, ending now in a small pond. Will was happy to see that the soggy peat and plants did not make up its banks, but rather packed dirt caused by the roots of a large tree. He was far enough away from the others that the sound of voices was vague and distant.

He was blissfully alone.

Will wasted no time in divesting himself of his armor and pack, tossing it all into a heap on the dense ground along with his gladius. He pulled his tunic over his head and untied the straps of his greaves, plopping down on his rear like a boisterous child while wearing nothing but his shorts.

Cross-legged and downright giddy with the feeling of personal freedom, Will leaned forward to dip his hands into the cold water of the pond. He splashed it into his face—once, twice, three times—and scrubbed eagerly at the muck that had long since dried and clung to his skin.

He jumped when he heard the slog of a footstep in the peat.

"Forgive me. I had not intended to startle you."

Will instantly recognized the voice of Hannibal and was pacified. He rubbed the water out of his eyes and looked up to see Hannibal standing not five feet away, regarding his state of undress with a raised brow. "I was washing the away soot," Will explained, feeling an intense desire to defend his near nakedness.

"So I see." Hannibal smirked and moved forward when Will made no move to stop him, setting down his own pack and sword next to Will's. "I'd like to do the same, if you'd allow me the use of your pool."

Will flushed and turned away with a nod. "It's not mine."

“You found it, therefore it is yours.”

“Then yes, you may use it.”

“Thank you.” Hannibal sounded endlessly amused and Will wanted to throw a handful of soggy plants at him. Instead, he returned to scrubbing the chilly water over his face. He pretended not to notice when Hannibal sat down next to him, but his peripheral vision betrayed him quickly.

Hannibal was down to nothing more than his pants, legs rolled up above his knees.

It was then that Will discovered the mysterious dark markings were not solely on the Persian’s forearms.

Hannibal’s torso was made up of rich skin and rippling muscle, appearing every bit the warrior he had proven to be in action. Tendrils of black ink swirled along his shoulder blades and pectorals, forming strange words and images that Will did not recognize. Will immediately turned away when he realized Hannibal was watching him, face impossibly red.

“Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“It’s rude to stare.”

Hannibal exhaled and Will was certain it was a laugh. “Was the stare one of disgust?”

Will sloshed water up over his arms to rub away the grime. “No.”

“Then I don’t find it rude. I’ve stared at you as well, after all.”

Will felt as though he would always be taken off guard by the blatant openness that was Hannibal. Hannibal seemed to possess no shame at all. He spoke his mind with a veracity that Will envied. He turned to look at the older man, not surprised in the least to find that Hannibal was still watching him.

“I was…” his eyes flicked down to Hannibal’s chest and back and to the scars and markings that adorned them. “Was looking at the markings.”

Hannibal nodded slowly and turned away, reaching into the water to begin washing the remains of the farmlands off as well. “You look at them quite often.”

Will wasn’t certain if he was pushing outside his boundaries, but Hannibal gave him no indication that he was to cease the topic. “I’ve seen so few markings like that. It’s an art I am not accustomed to.”

“Art.” Hannibal appeared to taste the word on his tongue. He threw water onto his hair and slicked it back. “Some of it is art, yes.”

Will chewed his lip. “And the rest?”

“More akin to brands, I’m afraid.” Hannibal made no move to show discomfort at the truth. He spoke with the indifferent tone of a man with old and faded scars.

Will felt his stomach twist. “Oh.”

“Does this make you uncomfortable?”

“It makes me angry.”

Hannibal chuckled at that. “I see.”

Will shook his head, realizing how vague he must sound. “If you’re asking if I’m discomfited by the sight of slave brandings on your skin, then the answer is yes. If you’re asking if that discomfort is towards you, then the answer is absolutely not.” He waited until Hannibal looked at him, feeling the need to convey his earnestness through his eyes. “I must admit that the very idea of someone I have come to envision as quite powerful being submitted to such things,” Will clenched a fist. “It angers me.”

Hannibal was grinning broadly now. “You envision me as powerful?”

Will’s mouth hung open. “Did I say that just now?”

Hannibal’s eyes sparked. “You did. Though I must admit your anger on my behalf flatters me.”

Will pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to restrain his embarrassment. “I’ve never understood slavery. It is everywhere in Rome. We even have slaves in the century, of course.” He shifted around and began washing off his legs. “But I’ve never been entirely comfortable with the idea that one human being could own another. I find it tasteless and arrogant.”

“I’m not sure many of your countrymen would agree with you.”

“Nor many of yours.”

“Entirely true.” Hannibal had taken a bottle of oil from his pack and was rubbing it into his arms. “I am of the same mind as you. For one man to own another is to assume the power of a god. Men are not gods.”

Will hummed in agreement, looking at the oil with curiosity. “What is that?”

Hannibal held up the bottle in question. “Almond oil. Though the land is damp, the climate is dry. It soothes the skin.” He smiled at Will’s intrigued expression. “Would you like to use some?”

Will shook his head quickly. “No, I couldn’t ask that of you. It’s such a small bottle.”

“A few drops go a long way, Will.” Hannibal turned and gestured for Will to face his back to him. “Please, humor me.”

Will bit his lip and hesitated, both self-conscious and guilty for wasting Hannibal's things. When he saw that Hannibal had no intention of being refused, he sighed in defeat and turned around. He let out a yelp when cold water splashed onto his back. "What—"

Hannibal laughed outright. "Skittish, aren't you? You hadn't rinsed your back, Will. The oil is useless on dirty skin."

Will blushed and bit back the urge to argue that he wasn't dirty. It would have been a ludicrous argument to make. After the fire he had gotten downright filthy. He shuddered when Hannibal splashed more water onto him and swiped a large hand down his back to rid it of dirt. Whether the shudder was from the cold of the water or the warmth of Hannibal's hand, Will had no desire to decide.

When Hannibal switched to the oil and rubbed it gently into his skin, Will had no way to deny that the hand caused his shivers now. He shut his eyes and took a moment to enjoy the contact. It had been a long time since he'd been touched so softly. The life of a soldier was rough and harsh. Even his interactions with his friends were jostling; slapping shoulders and rough teasing. Hannibal's soft touch was a welcome contrast to normality.

"This should ease the chafing from your armor," Hannibal murmured, using both hands to rub the oil into Will's shoulders. "Yet another reason I don't wear metal."

Will took in a deep breath, catching the sweet scent of the oil. "I can't argue with that. The armor isn't comfortable, but you become accustomed to it."

"As with all things." Hannibal slid his hands down Will's upper arms. "You're incredibly tense. Is my touch causing you unease?" His hands paused.

Will let out a tight laugh and shook his head. "I'm not uncomfortable. It's relaxing me."

Hannibal's hands started their movement again. "Your muscles say otherwise. You seem poised to flee."

"I'm simply unused to such contact," Will admitted. He leaned into Hannibal's touch. He knew that the touches weren't entirely innocent. They'd been honest enough with each other up until this point. Ignoring the obvious would be a vain endeavor. "It's taken me off guard, but I'm not uncomfortable."

"Good." Hannibal pressed his hands to the sides of Will's neck, slipping just over his collarbone. "If I'm entirely honest with you, I'm getting quite the selfish enjoyment from this."

Will grinned. "I guessed."

Hannibal let out a huff of breath, twisting his fingers into the back of Will's hair in a gentle tug before moving away. "We should start our training soon."

Will let out a soft sound when Hannibal's hand ran into his hair, eyes widening at the boldness of the action. He swallowed roughly and turned to face the other man once more.

“We seem to keep ending up in unsatisfactory conditions for it.” He gestured to the soggy swamp. His scalp tingled from where Hannibal had touched it.

The captain looked around, considering. “Not necessarily. The trees have a wider spread here and there are places where the soil is firm. We couldn’t do a great deal, but I could teach you some simpler things here.”

“Truly?” Will felt a spike of adrenaline and nervousness in the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t expected Hannibal to suggest they begin. The talk of training had remained nothing more than talk for so long that the training itself had seemed like a distant, improbable promise. “I don’t know.”

Hannibal regarded the younger man skeptically. “Second thoughts?”

“No. I’m…” Will’s shoulders sagged. He trailed his fingertips over the surface of the pond. “I’m lacking some confidence, I suppose.”

“You’ve been given no reason to feel confident as of yet.” Hannibal said it as a matter of fact, entirely devoid of judgment. “I will change that.”

Will’s fingers skittered to a stop over the water and he looked over at the man beside him. “The level of confidence you seem to have in me astounds me.”

Hannibal returned the look steadily. “And it astounds me that you feel you are undeserving.”

“How are you so certain about me?”

“How are you not?”

Will snorted. “Don’t just throw my questions back at me. That’s not fair in the least.”

Hannibal eyes narrowed in a smile. “I never claimed to be fair, Will.” At Will’s impatient sigh, he surrendered. “Alright, to answer your question, I don’t know why I am so certain about you. I am an instinctual man. My intuition has rarely led me astray in the past and so when I find it telling me that you are someone worth a second glance, I’m keen to listen to it.”

Will nodded, letting the words settle into his thoughts.

“Similarly, I might ask you how you are so trusting of my intentions.” Hannibal leaned an elbow on his knee and watched a bird land in a tree nearby. “You question my certainty of you, but you seem equally certain of me, it seems.”

“Well of course,” Will said immediately, not even bothering to fault himself for blurting. “You’ve given me no reason to mistrust you.”

“If you eagerly trust people on lack of guilt, you must be betrayed constantly.”

“It’s not that.” Will’s eyes followed the bird Hannibal was watching. It jumped between branches, chirping and searching in the twigs. He wondered what it was looking for. “I’ve

plenty of intuition myself. Sometimes I even put it to use. You've only ever been honest with me, to the point where it surpasses most people I've known. I feel compelled to trust you. Perhaps that is foolish of me, but it remains to be true."

The bird chirped again and flew off into the night, having found whatever it sought. Hannibal turned his eyes back to Will. "I hope to earn the faith I do not yet deserve."

Will smiled and rubbed at his neck. His skin was soft from the almond oil. "Likewise."

Chapter End Notes

I love all your comments. Thank you for leaving them. :)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> “It doesn’t hurt to expect things every now and then. Without expectation, there’s nothing to look forward to. How else will you obtain what you desire if you do not anticipate it?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will cursed as his knees hit the cold and soppy muck of the bog. He sank into the peat, shaking off the moss clinging to his hands. Hannibal was watching him with a smug gleam in his eye. He stood back on firm soil, barely having broken a sweat. Will was a stark contrast to the superiority that was Hannibal in that moment. The young legionary was covered in dirt and muck and looked thoroughly defeated. Breathing heavily, he wiped away the perspiration from his eyes and got back to his feet, sending a glare in Hannibal’s direction.

“How is constantly throwing me to the swamp teaching me anything?” Will hadn’t meant his voice to carry as much bite as it did, but he was tired and frustrated and Hannibal was just standing there with that infuriating smirk on his face. “All I’m learning is that the soil here smells like rot if you shove your face far enough into it.”

Hannibal chuckled. “You’ll know what I’m teaching you once you learn it.” He gestured for Will to come closer. “You’re far too focused on avoiding my strikes.”

“Is that not the goal?” Will stomped through the muck until he was facing the older man once more. “Should I be leaning into your blows?”

Hannibal’s eyebrows rose at the sarcasm, but he made no comment on it. “Use my blows against me and to your advantage. In focusing on avoidance, you ultimately pay too little attention to your own movements. Make my movements your own and you will succeed in both aspects.”

Will took a steadying breath, taking in the earthy scent of the moors. If anyone had told him he was going to spend the night being thrown around a bog in nothing but his smallclothes by an assertive Persian, he might have had a thing or two to say about it. Regardless of hindsight, he was here and he couldn’t walk away now. “Alright then. Again.” He wasn’t going to give up.

Hannibal looked pleased. “Good.”

Will braced himself as Hannibal came for him. His every instinct told him to duck, dodge, flee, but he struggled to hold his ground. He kept his eyes on the man before him, watching

how his feet moved, where his arms went, how his torso twisted. Hannibal had said that the body spoke a language all its own. It was simply a matter of learning how to speak it.

Hannibal moved for Will's arm, grabbing it to throw Will bodily towards the trees. Will grit his teeth and told himself to move alongside the momentum of the throw—let the attack propel him rather than hinder him.

Will let his arm go slack in Hannibal's grip and jumped into the throw, using his slight bodyweight to the best of his advantage by dropping back down to the ground hard and fast. His other hand went to the dark wrist straining against his forearm and held fast. Hannibal's grip stuttered and he was jerked downwards by Will's fall. He tried to let go, but Will's other hand restrained the effort.

With a grunt and a flurry of moss, they were both in a heap on the ground.

Hannibal blinked over at Will, laughing as he shook plants from his hair. "Better, but you're not supposed to go down as well."

Will, invigorated by the small victory, jumped to his feet. "I don't care!" he exclaimed, grin stretching his cheeks. "I took you down. The great and mighty Hannibal, felled by a medic."

Hannibal shook his head as he stood. There was a glint in his eye as he watched Will preen and before Will knew what hit him, his legs were out from under him and he was staring up at the once again smirking face of Hannibal.

Hannibal crossed his arms over his chest where he stood, giving Will a challenging look. "You were saying?"

"I wasn't ready!"

"Opponents will not wait for you to ready yourself, Will," Hannibal replied calmly, helping Will back to his feet. "And arrogance will cripple you faster than any blade." At Will's grumpy scowl, he added. "But I will admit that you took me entirely off guard by throwing your weight as you did."

Will allowed the compliment to settle his ruffled feathers and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I got cocky."

"You did." He frowned and moved Will's hand away from his neck, leaning forward to look at it. "Did you injure your neck?"

Will shivered at the hand on his neck and shook his head. "No. It's just a bit stiff."

"Perhaps we should rest for the night," Hannibal suggested as he stepped back.

"No. I want to keep going."

"As a medic you should know the value of not straining the body."

Will stopped himself from rolling his eyes. “I’m not made of glass.” He was tired of everyone babying him.

Hannibal frowned again. “Believe me, I was under no such impression, Will.”

Will’s shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry, Hannibal. I’ve grown accustomed to people assuming that I cannot handle myself. I shouldn’t be snapping at you.”

Hannibal waved a forgiving palm toward the younger man. “I understand. I assure you that I do not find you to be weak in the slightest. Even the strongest men must know when to rest, but if you say you want to continue,” he shrugged and moved to change his stance. “Continue we shall.”

Will chewed his lip and nodded. There was no reason for him to be so short with Hannibal. The man had shown nothing but faith in his abilities and encouraged him. He did not deserve to receive the brunt of Will’s bitterness. “I want to prove you’re right about me.”

“You do with each moment that passes,” Hannibal responded plainly. Before Will could process the words, he was moving at him again and Will was forced to focus on the task at hand.

They continued on like that for two more hours before Hannibal finally called for them to cease. After many exhausted protests from Will, Hannibal managed to drag the legionary back to the pond and get him cleaned up once more. They donned their armor and packs and slowly made their way back to camp.

Will hoped quietly to himself that most of the men would be sleeping. It was only a matter of time before his friendship with Hannibal had reached enough ears to make secrecy pointless, but he found that fact pushing him no closer to comfort in the stares he anticipated receiving. As impossible as it was, Will wanted to keep these moments with Hannibal to himself for as long as he was able.

It was a naïve and foolish desire and he knew that as soon as they set foot back in the camps. Plenty of men were still awake. Some sent curious glances towards the two men emerging from the trees. Many ignored the oddity while some took a more examining turn, tilting their heads and trying to gain a better grasp of the situation. Will ducked his head, avoiding the inquisitive stares. He started when Hannibal clapped a hand to his shoulder.

“Don’t allow it to worry you, Will.”

“Easier said than done. I don’t want any trouble. I don’t want *them* to cause any trouble.” Will nodded towards the Roman soldiers in particular. A few were still pinning them with wary gazes.

“If you were truly concerned about trouble,” Hannibal waited until Will looked up at him. “You would have stopped speaking to me long ago.”

Will sighed, but he knew Hannibal was right. “You don’t need to be right all the time.”

Hannibal smiled softly. “It’s a habit.”

With a snort, Will came to a stop at the edge of the auxilia camp. “Thank you for the training.” He paused and pressed a thumb to the crease between his eyes. “I feel like I’m thanking you all the time.”

“As much as I enjoy your appreciation, you don’t need to thank me quite so often.”

“I would feel like an ass if I didn’t,” Will admitted. “So thank you, again. For everything.” His eyes met Hannibal’s and for a moment he let himself stare into the darkness of them. “We won’t be able to stop at Tarsus long. We’re far too behind, but upon reaching Antioch, I’d…” he cut himself off, blushing.

Thankfully, Hannibal finished the thought for him. It was a small mercy. “I would like to spend more time with you in Antioch as well.”

Will’s blush darkened and he looked away. “I would like that.”

It seemed Hannibal wished to spare Will from his own awkwardness and he removed his hand from the smaller man’s shoulder. “Go rest. It has been an exceedingly long day and we have an even longer trek ahead of us tomorrow. We’ve had enough soldiers felled by heat and fires. Do me a kindness and do not add yourself to the list.”

Will wanted to ask why it would be a kindness to Hannibal, but he thought better of it. It would likely lead to answers that would do nothing to ease the flush of his face and he desperately wished to regain some semblance of dignity before the night was done. He bid Hannibal a good night and trudged his way back to the camp, searching for a tent with a familiar face.

Eventually, he came across Jove and Valerian holed up in a tent with a few of the more seasoned legionaries. They were all shed to their tunics and talking amongst one another with wine and bread. There was laughter and fondness and mutual respect and it seemed as good a place as any to settle down for the night. Will smiled when Jove waved to him to join them and made to sit beside him, gratefully accepting the wine offered.

He looked around at the men within the tent. The faces were those of veterans; men that Will had encountered on many occasions over the years. Though he was not overly friendly with any of them, he knew them all and the familiarity was a relief.

“You’ve been gone for ages,” Jove whispered to Will under the murmur of voices. “Anything of concern?” His leg was resting casually against Valerian’s, but if anyone noticed, no one spoke up. Both men were far too admired to be called out.

Will shook his head and took a gulp of watered down wine with a grimace. “I started training tonight, actually.”

Jove’s eyebrows rose. “I see. And it went well?” He looked Will up and down; assessing. “You don’t appear to be wounded or displeased, so I assume it must have gone favorably.”

Will laughed at the observation. “No, I’m not injured. He’s not swinging bare swords at me, Jove.”

“One can never be sure.” Jove relaxed with a grin. “So it went well?”

A nod and Will was drinking his wine again. It tasted just as unimpressive as the first attempt. “It did. I even managed to take him down a few times. I surprised myself, actually.”

Jove squeezed the other man’s shoulder. “I knew you would.”

Will rolled his eyes. “None of you knew any such thing. I’ve never displayed any level of talent in the realm of combat.”

“You’re far too critical of yourself, Will. You make it sound as though you don’t even know which way to swing a gladius.”

“I barely do.”

“Nonsense.”

“Only mostly nonsense.”

Jove snorted. “Entirely nonsense.”

Will shrugged and feigned confusion. “You swing it at the enemy, right?”

“That’s what they tell me.” Jove’s eyes were sparkling with mirth.

“Damn.” Will snapped his fingers. “See, I’ve been doing it wrong.”

“You’re swinging swords at what, then? Trees?”

“I just swing at everything until I hit something.”

Valerian peeked around Jove with a puzzled expression. “It sounds like you two are having a riveting conversation.” He leaned on his knees. “And giving me good reason to take Will’s gladius away.”

“Our Will here has taken to insulting himself again, I’m afraid,” Jove offered, waving off Will’s indignant splutter. “He has begun training and was surprised to find that he was not entirely hopeless.”

“Not *entirely*,” Will mumbled.

“Well no point arguing with him.” Valerian tossed Will an end of bread. “If eleven years of his stubbornness has taught me anything, it’s that he is perfectly content to remain diffident.”

Will poked at his bread. “My diffidence is well earned. I worked hard for it.”

“Where’s Lucas when you need him?” Jove was leaning back on his palms and yawning back sleep. “He out-complains you easily.”

Will felt a stab of guilt and bowed his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so dreary. I truly am pleased with tonight.”

Jove frowned when he realized Will’s turn of emotion. “Will, I was only teasing. We aren’t bothered.”

Will stared at his bread. “You’re right. I complain far too much for my own good.” He looked around and lowered his voice so only the two men beside him could hear. “Hannibal has shown me that perhaps I am too eager to discount myself.”

“It seems his lessons extend further than combat,” Valerian observed. “I should like to meet this man properly one day.”

“If he’d allow it,” Jove pointed out.

Will frowned and considered the prospect of introducing his friends to Hannibal. It seemed like such a bland concept. You introduced friends to family, lovers, teachers. Which one was Hannibal? Will found that he wasn’t entirely certain if Hannibal fit any of those categories at all. “I don’t know how appropriate it would be,” he said honestly. “As strange as it may sound, I’m not sure where he and I stand with one another. It’s an odd set of circumstances, to put it lightly. Meeting him on my behalf would seem incongruous, almost.”

Valerian made a sound of understanding. “So you haven’t decided on certain aspects, then?”

Will chewed his lip and looked around again, paranoid that they would be overheard. It was a nonsensical paranoia. Most of the other men were half drunk or asleep by now. The moon was high in the sky and the night was nearing its peak. There were no prying ears or eyes. “It’s not so much about deciding anything.” He struggled with a way to explain his thoughts. He didn’t understand half of them himself. “It’s all been a set of action and consequence rather than forethought. I know that sounds irresponsible but—“

Jove cut him off. “It sounds exciting.”

Will looked up in surprise. “You think so?”

Jove was leaning more heavily against Valerian now, having noticed the lethargy of the soldiers around them. “I do. Honestly, Will, this all sounds like something out of a story.”

Will’s blush deepened. “I don’t know if it’s that romantic.”

A wink. “Well you would know best, but from where I’m standing this all sounds terribly romantic.”

Valerian had nothing to add, seemingly content with observing the conversation with a serene passivity.

Will pushed out a bedroll behind him and laid back, staring at the roof of the tent. “Maybe you’re right, but I don’t think I want to look at it that way.” He glanced when Valerian and Jove followed suit and lay down as well. “It would press expectations upon everything and I’m not overly fond of expectations.”

Jove tapped Will's elbow and smiled. "It doesn't hurt to expect things every now and then. Without expectation, there's nothing to look forward to. How else will you obtain what you desire if you do not anticipate it?"

"I suppose I need to decide what it is that I desire." Will sighed and shut his eyes.

Jove said nothing and left Will to his thoughts. Will appreciated the courtesy. Truth be told, he knew exactly what he desired. That desire had only been solidified earlier that evening with the warm press of hands to his back and unsubtle hands in his hair. Will shivered at the memory. Yes, he knew precisely what he desired.

But wanting and expecting were two very different things. Expectations left room for disappointment.

Will rubbed a hand over his face and waited for sleep to claim him. The last thing he wanted in regards to Hannibal was to end up disappointed, but he knew it was inevitable. It was only a matter of time before the auxilia moved on or Hannibal tired of him. Jove was right. It was exciting, but as exciting as it was, there was no hope for it to be anything but short-lived.

Whatever it was that he had with Hannibal was destined to be a shooting star in the night sky. Will had been lucky enough to look up at just the right time and catch a glimpse, but soon the star would fall and never be seen again. As such, he resolved to appreciate the sight for what it was. He would revel in the glow and wonder of it and when it passed he would accept the end with as much grace and dignity as he could manage. It was all one could hope for in such times.

As he surrendered to the pull of slumber, Will told himself that he could accept this. He had no choice. This repeated like a mantra in his head as his eyes slid shut.

Will jerked awake to find that he was standing upon a battlefield.

His greaves were soaked in blood and the shrieking sounds of metal and death were ringing in his ears. His breath stuck in his chest and he looked around in a panic, the frenzy of battle blurring his vision and buzzing in his head. An arrow whizzed by his cheek with a whistle and he dropped to his knees with a pounding heart, trying to see where it had come from.

His hands found balance on something soft and warm and he gasped as he realized it was a body. He looked down and his voice choked in his throat like a stone as he saw who lay beneath him.

Hannibal was looked at him weakly, blood gurgling past his lips as he tried uselessly to staunch the blood flowing from his abdomen.

Will let out a horrified sound and frantically reached for his medical pack. It was nowhere to be found. "No. No!" he blindly searched the ground around them. It was littered with arrows and bodies and blood. His pack was not there.

How had he gotten here? He couldn't remember going into battle. He couldn't remember anything. Where had he been last? Will shook away the questions as Hannibal coughed on his

own blood and he reached down to turn the older man's head to the side so he wouldn't choke.

Will moved Hannibal's hands out of the way to inspect the wound to his gut. He groaned in distress when he saw it. The captain had nearly been cleaved open. Will was no fool. There was no recovering from this. He felt tears sting at his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Hannibal's eyes were filled with disappointment. He had trusted Will. He had faith in him. Will had let him down.

Will clumsily pressed at the wound as though trying to hold the other man together. "I told you," he sobbed. "I told you that you should have left me behind." The words were spilling from him from the depths of a void. He didn't know what they meant or where they came from. They leaked from him like tears. "Why didn't you just leave me? I told you this would happen." Blood slicked his fingers and he slipped, causing Hannibal to gasp in pain.

Will tried to wipe his face and only succeeded in smearing blood across it. "I can't fix this!" Hannibal's skin was turning pale. His eyes were growing dull. "Stop, please. Stop!" He knew there was no use in begging death. Death would not listen.

Hannibal's hands, trembling, came to rest on Will's own. They tried to push him away, but Will refused. "No! This is my fault. This is because of me." His tears were falling onto his hands and mixing with crimson like oil dripping onto a lake. He was dizzy with fear and despair. If only Hannibal had listened to him. If only he had given up on Will and walked away. This would never have happened.

Hannibal's lips smacked with the sticky sound of blood as he tried to speak. His voice was no more than a breath of air; barely audible. "Will."

Will shook his head viciously. His whole body was shaking. "No. This won't happen!"

"Will."

"No. Please just stop!" Will was bordering on hyperventilating. The blood was coming more freely now. He couldn't stop it.

"Will!"

Will jerked awake. He jolted up on the bedroll, covered in sweat and breathing like he had run for miles. Jove was looming over him in the darkness, a deep frown worrying his features. "Will," he repeated.

Will slowly came back to himself. He wiped away the sweat from his face and focused on easing the ache of his lungs. "I was dreaming."

Jove let out a deep breath and sat back. "Yes."

Will groaned quietly into his hands. "I'm sorry."

"Stop that. It happens to all of us."

Will raised his face and looked around. Sure enough, the other soldiers in the tent were regarding him with tired, understanding eyes. Will knew full well that every single one of these men had dreams just like that one—dreams of blood and death and loss. It was part of being a soldier. It was part of war. “I know. I’m just sorry it woke you.”

Jove squeezed his arm and lay back down. “I’m glad it did. No good to let a man suffer through those dreams if he doesn’t need to.” His voice carried a heavy weight of experience. He was likely remembering his own hauntings. “Can you sleep?”

Will frowned as Hannibal’s bleeding body flashed behind his eyelids. “No. I don’t think so.” He swept back his hair in an attempt to push the sweaty strands out of his eyes. It did little good. “It’s alright. I think Cimon is on guard duty. I’ll walk with him.”

Jove understood the pointlessness of trying to convince Will otherwise and nodded, watching him with resigned concern as Will rose on shaky legs and left the tent.

The cold night air hit Will like a slap to the face. It was a welcome shock to his system, cooling his overheated body and pressing the remains of the dream into the back of his mind. He looked around at the quiet of the camp. Anyone who wasn’t on guard was asleep now and the silence was a powerful, sweeping thing. Will briefly considered going to find Hannibal—even if it was just to convince himself the man was still alive—but he knew the Persian would be sleeping and it felt entirely intrusive to wake him over something so juvenile. Instead, he decided to keep to his word and seek out Cimon.

Will wandered for a good twenty minutes through the camp, damp and sopping plants of the marsh making soft sounds under his greaves, before he finally stumbled upon Cimon’s post. The lumbering man was leaning casually on his pilum, staring out across the plains towards Tarsus. He smiled when he saw Will approach.

“Sleepless night?”

Will nodded and felt immeasurably small as he moved to stand next to the other man. It was like tossing a pile of soil next to a mountain. The contrast bordered on hilarity. “Dreams.”

Cimon frowned knowingly. “Well help me keep watch, then.”

“It’s not as though anyone’s coming.” Will had said it out of a desire to have something to say rather than the intention to question orders. They both knew there would be no attack tonight. They were still far too deep into Roman borders to find any real enemies, but the discipline of the legion was not something to be trifled with.

“You never know,” Cimon teased, pushing the sharp end of his spear further into the peat. “Perhaps demons will rise from the earth to take us all.”

Will let out a bark of a laugh. “You’re awfully dark tonight.”

“No darker than your dream, I’d wager.”

Will knew a prod for information when he heard one. Cimon was never very subtle. “It was just some battle. Death. Blood. More death.”

“If that was the case, you wouldn’t be standing here with me right now.” Cimon regarded him curiously. Will cursed him for knowing him so well. “We all have those dreams and we’ve been at this long enough that we can easily find sleep again after the majority. Only the specific ones keep men like us awake, Will. What was specific about this one?”

Will chewed his lip and braced his hands on his lower back, quietly gazing towards the horizon.

“You don’t have to tell me. I simply—“

“No, no.” Will shook his head and shot Cimon an apologetic look. “It’s not that I don’t want to say. I’m still sorting through it myself.”

“I see.” Cimon thought on this for a moment. “It impacted you.”

“It did.”

“Was it a memory?” Cimon’s voice held a careful tone. He was concerned Will would bring up one of their long lost friends—one of the men they had lost so many years ago. Those were painful memories.

Will quickly moved to assuage the concern. “Not a memory,” he assured. “A… fear of the future, I suppose.”

Cimon made a sound but said nothing, not wishing to intrude on Will’s consideration of the dream.

Will didn’t know why he was so hesitant to reveal the contents of Morpheus’ taunt. There was no shame in it. “Hannibal was there.” He swallowed roughly. “Dying beneath my hands and I was helpless to stop it. I felt, at the time, as though it was an inevitable conclusion and I felt uncontrollably angry with myself.” He hadn’t meant his response to be so candid, but there was no taking back the words now.

Cimon did not seem displeased by the honesty. If anything, his expression softened. “You feel as though he should not be placing any faith in you.”

The accuracy of the statement struck Will like an arrow. “I guess there’s no purpose in denying it.”

“Do you find it literal?” Cimon asked. “Do you truly believe that you will get someone killed if they put trust in your combat skills?”

“Don’t you?” Will couldn’t hold back the petulant response. “I’m no warrior. Put me next to someone on a battlefield in such a capacity and they will have placed their faith incorrectly. One would wish me at their back with a bandage in hand, not a blade.”

“I would wish you at my back regardless of what was in your hand,” Cimon replied point blank. He rolled his shoulders and shifted against the pilum. The metal of his armor made a dull thunking sound. “Never before have I seen someone so focused in battle. You don’t even blink as an arrow flies past your face or a sword swings just over your head. You change in those moments. You are a force of sheer focus and it’s something I’ve always admired.”

Will blinked, surprised. He had never thought of himself in such a capacity. Yes, he found a level of purpose during battle that allowed him a focus he couldn’t access during the unbloodied hours of the day, but that was because it was his purpose. He couldn’t allow distractions to take him from his goal. People needed his help. If he blinked, if he swayed, if he faltered people could die.

Cimon rest his chin on his knuckles, eyes still scanning the field. “There are many kinds of warrior. I cannot promise you that Hannibal will not die, or me, or Tertius, or Caeso, or anyone we love.” He sighed and it was such a soft sound to come from such a large man. “You know I can promise no such thing, but I can promise that it will never be your fault. Death is the nature of things. We are all going to die one day and being soldiers a lot of us are going to die sooner than most. You know this, Will. Why is it that the concept Hannibal could succumb to this just as we could surprises you so?”

“He feels separate from all of this, somehow,” Will replied with no small hint of embarrassment. It seemed an absurd sort of thing; putting Hannibal in a category so distinctly different. He was not of another world, but as much as Will knew this, he still felt as though Hannibal was an element that had seeped through the cracks of war and death. He was something else entirely. He was different from anything Will had ever known.

But Will had no idea why.

The brunette shook his head, disturbing the frizzing locks that were already in disarray. “Sorry. I don’t even know what I’m saying.”

“Better to let the words out then have them eat away at your mind,” Cimon answered with another roll of his shoulders. “But I think I know what you mean.”

“Then please tell me because I have no idea what I mean.” Will tried to laugh but it came out hollow.

“Hannibal isn’t part of the century, but more than that your relationship with him isn’t similar to your relationship with the rest of us. There is no denying that, Will.” He gave Will a look, but it held no judgement.

“Is it truly so apparent?”

“Yes.” Cimon seemed to wrestle with something before he spoke, letting his words fall slowly. “Please be careful, Will. If the wrong eyes saw or the wrong ears heard…”

“I know.”

“At the very least you’d find yourself at the brunt of severe castigation.”

“I know.”

“I know you know. Just be careful.”

Will met Cimon’s eyes and found a deep thread of worry within them. It clutched at his chest. He didn’t like others to worry so much about him, but it seemed to be all they ever did. Worry. A stab of resentment towards himself slithered up his spine like ice. Was he really so weak that all everyone could do was worry about him? That wouldn’t do. That had to change. “I promise,” he said, squaring his feet in an effort to feel stronger; more solid. “I’ll be okay.”

The intention became concrete within himself at that moment. He would disprove that dream. He would disprove the worry and the doubt and the uncertainty. If only so that he could avoid looks like the one Cimon gave him now.

He told himself it was a simple goal. He persuaded the inner workings of his mind that it was entirely attainable. He reassured his psyche that it was not hopeless. He could triumph. If not for himself, then for all of those who felt concern for him and cared for him. Perhaps he could not overcome for himself alone, but he could do it for them.

He smiled at Cimon, more assured this time. “I promise, truly. I’ll be alright.”

And Cimon seemed satisfied with the certainty of the words and the conviction held behind them. His gaze softened to one of affection and respect and Will found he liked that look much more than the previous one of burden.

They fell into a companionable silence, watching the night go by in stuttering steps as the stars faded and the dawn began to creep over the edge of the trees in shades of purple and blue. Will found himself mesmerized by moments like these. The air was cool against his face and smelled of roots and water and mud and he let the pale colors of the sunrise sink into his skin.

Moments like these held a serenity unrivaled by the slips of time the soldiers managed to steal for themselves. Though war was only a rumor on the edge of thought, life in the century was by no means one of repose. It was a long, tiresome, demanding way of being and there was no man alive among them that did not seek asylum in the beauty of motion come to a halt.

Will was resting on his haunches, eyes stinging from lack of rest. The cold of the morning chilled the sleep from his aching muscles and he relished in the reviving quality of it. Cimon was next to him, tall and silent like a sentinel to watch over Will’s private sanctuary.

They were both started from their outward gazes by the crunch of feet behind them. Greaves dug into the dew covering the grass and branches that littered the soft earth and Will glanced over his shoulder to get a look at the intruder.

Caeso greeted them with a tired grin and wave, helmet held steady under his arm.

Will rolled his shoulders and stood, knowing that the sight of Caeso in full armor meant they were set to head out soon. “Hello.”

“Have you been awake the whole night, Will?” Caeso’s tone was bordering on chiding, but he knew better than to scold Will. Will was far too stubborn to take well to scolding.

Will pursed his lips and exchanged a look with Cimon. “So has Cimon. I see no difference.”

“Cimon took his rest during the setting of camp.” Caeso raised a challenging eyebrow. “You can make no such claim.”

Will grumbled something under his breath and kicked at the peat with his toe. “Right, well, yes I have been up all night.”

“We’re lugging around enough wounded without having to add your unconscious body to the mix.” Caeso’s voice carried the concern of a leader then and Will was grateful for the lack of bias in it.

Immediately, he felt a pang of remorse. Caeso had enough to concern himself with. The addition of soldiers falling unconscious from exhaustion would do no one any good. “Don’t worry. I’m tired, yes, but not to the level of detriment. I had dreams, I woke, and I stayed out here with Cimon. I know my limits.”

Caeso made a discontented sound but raised his hands in defeat. “There’s no denying that,” he agreed reluctantly. “We’ve all had nights of dreams. It would be no more fit for me to judge you of that than it would be for you to judge it of me.”

“How very diplomatic of you.”

“I try not to let hypocrisy be my standard.”

Cimon snorted a laugh involuntarily and Caeso levelled him with a glare. The large man paled and looked innocently at the sunset. “What? Who made that noise?”

“You are absolutely hysterical,” Caeso deadpanned.

“I like to think so.”

Will chuckled and pushed his hair out of his face. “We’re leaving early today. Will be make it to Tarsus by nightfall?”

“That’s the intention.” Caeso tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the gleaming metal of his helmet. “It’s ambitious, but if we are successful we can afford to be more generous with our remaining rations in turn so the men do not grow as weary.”

The red of Caeso’s hair seemed to glow in the rising light of the morning. Will thought that he always looked like he was about to burst into flames and found it fitting. It left him with a vision of their brave legatus riding off into battle with a raised gladius and taunting flames at his back. Enemies would balk and the soldiers would be bolstered by the mystical display. He found the image something of a comfort.

“And once in Tarsus?” Cimon inquired, hefting his pilum into his other hand and preparing to head back into the center of camp. “How long will we remain?”

The hope for rest was clear, but Caeso shook his head and dampened the expectation. “Long enough to restock our supplies and no longer. The time we have lost is beyond recovery and we simply cannot afford to add to it. We won’t be spending the night in Tarsus. We must force our way to the coast and camp along the cliff sides if we are to regain our pace.”

“Then calling the venture ambitious was being gentle about it.”

“It wouldn’t do for you legatus to tell you we’ll all be dead on our feet by sundown, now would it?” Caeso managed to keep some tease in his voice, but the honesty was apparent. No help would be found by wounding morale so early in the day. He turned to Will. “I saw you leave the auxilia camp last night.”

Will’s mouth hung open in surprise. Somehow, he’d expected his departure from Hannibal’s camp to be one entirely of stealth, despite the fact that he had seen multiple people witness the event. Logic was not the strongest point to that particular argument. “I see.” He blinked away his befuddlement and spoke again. “Hannibal and I began our training.”

They had begun to walk back to camp so they could eat and prepare to pack up the camp.

Caeso looked intrigued by Will’s admission. “I hadn’t expected that, to be honest. Part of me thought that it was nothing more than a tall tale.”

Will took the words in stride. “I wasn’t too far from that opinion myself, actually. Speaking and doing are two very different things, after all. Are you disappointed?”

“Do you feel you benefitted from the exchange?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose I am not disappointed.”

Will beamed and gripped Caeso amiably by the elbow to show his gratitude. Caeso returned the gesture.

“Legatus!”

Caeso dropped Will’s arm and turned, puzzled. “Yes, Decimus?”

Decimus was a centurion of the century and a terribly serious man. He’d seen more battles than most and had a vicious scar blunting half of his face to show for it. Though Will bore no distaste for the man, he preferred to steer clear of him. Decimus was a soldier who took his duty seriously and held regulations at a level of utmost importance, often droning on and on about the value of discipline and perseverance. Simply put, he was an austere man who would sooner force more work upon a legionary than allow for respite. Most legionaries avoided him to avoid the endless lectures turned their way if they were within earshot.

At the moment, however, Decimus looked anything but stern. His face was a pool of anxiety. “Caeso,” he said as he came to a stop before them. He seemed out of breath, but he’d hardly rushed towards them. The exertion was one of stress. All three men frowned as they prepared for whatever news Decimus had brought.

“Yes, Decimus. I’ve acknowledged you, so please do me the kindness of telling me why you are so distraught,” Caeso grit out patiently.

“A courier,” Decimus finally replied, composing himself. “Of the cursus publicus has arrived with news.” All men stood stiffly at the information. A courier was not always a bad sign, but a courier that put someone like Decimus into a state was undoubtedly bearing an unpleasant message. “Ardashir has refused yet another of Emperor Severus’ attempts at diplomacy, but it seems this time his rebuff is with intent.”

“Intent?” Caeso was gripping his helmet tightly, fingers digging into iron. “Please, Decimus, if you bring me news of war, I implore you to turn on your heel and not burden me with such news on this day.”

Decimus shook his head. His eyes were dark and weary. “Not war as of yet, but it seems now that it is an inevitable conclusion. Ardashir’s frustration over Armenia is mounting and alongside Severus’ foolhardy attempts at statecraft, we are looking at the possibility Ardashir will attempt our borders.” He drew in a breath and looked out over the plains. “I don’t believe it is mere possibility now, Caeso. If the news the courier brings is any indication, we’ve not long. A few months, at best. I’ve been through this enough times to know when we should ready our blades.”

Will had bitten back a comment on Decimus’ snub of Emperor Severus. It was very unlike the veteran to say anything that could be construed as anti-nationalistic. For the news to put him in such a state as to pull criticism from his lips, the situation was worrisome indeed. Instead of commenting on the thought, Will questioned the courier’s message. “Could it be the courier is overly excited?”

Decimus looked disgusted by the mere suggestion. “They do not employ children as couriers, Willhelm.”

Will scowled at the use of his full name and fell silent as Cimon put a calming hand on his shoulder.

“I understand Will’s perspective,” Caeso interjected. “The news is grave and can be easily miscommunicated. The entire situation has everyone on edge. Couriers are no exception to this. I should like to speak with him personally. Perhaps if he repeats his news we will gain a better understanding of how dire the situation truly is.”

Decimus did nothing to hide his displeasure. “Denial will serve no purpose, Caeso. You know as well as I what looms just outside our shadows.”

“Of course I know,” Caeso snapped. He paused and pressed a thumb to the bridge of his nose, attempting to ease his temper. “I know, Decimus. I am no fool, but there is little we can do where we are. Until we reach Antioch, we have few capabilities. And just the same, *you* know as well as I that the months required for Ardashir to make his move will allow us time for fortification.”

“That’s the entire issue.” Decimus was tugging at his lorica segmentata in frustration, adjusting the straps repeatedly. “Severus refuses to command military force in preparation.

He has not ordered fortification. He has not ordered the legions. He is avoiding the necessity of arms in favor of a diplomatic solution and Ardashir is beginning to take offense."

"He is not the only one taking offense," Cimon grunted out from between clenched teeth. "To ignore the threat is laughable."

"As I said, denial serves no purpose," Decimus said grimly. "I agree that we should speak to the courier again, but we must make haste to Antioch, Caeso. We cannot afford to lose time. If Severus will not allow us preparations, we must begin them on our own. The veterans of the legion will know this. They will prepare regardless of Severus' repudiation of our military."

"Communication without higher command will be near impossible," Will murmured. His arms were wrapped around his middle. Acid rose in his throat like a snake. "Our cohorts will not be attuned to one another. Synchronicity would be a fantasy." He was met with a dark silence.

They all knew what he said to be true, but no one wished to acknowledge it.

Without the backing of their emperor, the legions of Rome would be chaotic and haphazard. They would have no direction and no clear orders. Even if the veterans in command managed to bring forth some sort of plan, whether it be defensive or offensive, there would be no way to properly agree upon tactics without a set line of orders. It would take far too much time to come to an accord between all the cohorts when every single one was likely planning their own method of response to Persia's inevitable attack.

It would be disorder.

None of them wished to acknowledge that such disorder could bring upon one of the largest defeats in Roman history. The foreboding of it was too great. It loomed over them like a storm cloud set to strike lightning into the very heart of their strength.

Rome often won its battles by sheer number alone, relying on the mass of its forces to overtake any opposition, but without direction, their numbers were as useful as throwing pinches of sand upon a roaring flame.

Will prayed the flame would not consume them.

Chapter End Notes

There isn't much Hannibal in this chapter. Don't worry, I'll remedy that quickly in the next one.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Sometimes he swore he could feel Hannibal’s words like a physical caress. It was unsettling and invigorating all at once.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all your comments. They're great. :)

Tarsus had a wonderful many trees. It was the first thing that Will had noticed when they had set foot in the city. Strange as it was, considering the myriad of swampy forests they had passed in their travels, the trees stood out in Tarsus like something entirely foreign. Jove claimed it was due to the ocean air just off the coast. The heavy mist of salt and damp made the trees stronger, he had said—it made them resolute.

Will splayed his fingers over the rough bark of a nearby olive tree, taking in the mingling sweet and bitter scent of the fruit. He felt a serenity whisper past him like a breeze, enjoying the concept of this place. Tarsus was known for being a land of food and study. It spoke of sated intellect. The late tutor of Emperor Augustus, Athenodorus Cananites, had been a philosopher of Tarsus. As such, the city had found itself under the patronage of the imperium for the years following his service and passing. There was an academy here as a result, but it was with a sad resignation that Will accepted the fact that there would be no time to visit it.

The life of a soldier was not one of study. The life of a soldier on the brink of war even less so.

Caeso had made it clear that their stay in Tarsus would be brief. A moment’s pause, to gather supplies and speak with the decurio of the condition of the cavalry, and they would make their way to the shoreline and cliff sides to force their feet through the sand to Antioch.

The men made no secret of their displeasure with traveling along the shore. Sand and stone made for difficult navigation. Carts would be laborious to pull, the metal of their armor would sink them into the earth, and the haphazard juts of rock and stone along the cliffs would narrow them into unpleasant funnels. The stretch to Antioch would be an unpleasant one indeed. The lack of rest and rush of pace due to haste would only strengthen the discomfort.

Will pitied Caeso because of this. Though the men knew to respect their superiors in a way only rank can truly afford, soldiers were not diplomats. They were incapable of holding tongue or smoothing words. The quiet murmur of irritation spreading through the troops was becoming a dull roar and it all spiraled towards their legatus. Will wished, somehow, that he could lessen the burden of responsibility, but he wasn't foolish enough to believe his position in their rankings was of any true importance at the end of the day.

All he could do was offer a consoling smile and a friendly face. That was, if Caeso would be able to slow down long enough to look at Will and catch the gestures.

Will sighed as he once again failed to catch Caeso's eye and cast his own dosage of reassurance towards the man. The legatus was running back and forth, shouting orders and making plans and doing all the things a leader was required to do. Accepting defeat, Will shut his eyes and leaned back against the tree, allowing the bustling sounds of city life and tense men to drown into white noise in his ears.

Perhaps no one would notice if he slipped off to seek out the academy. He only wanted to see it. He wouldn't even talk to anyone.

He grimaced and questioned himself. Surely the others would be offended by his dismissal of duty. As immunes, he wasn't required to assist with any supplies other than medical, but Orion had announced in the most surly way possible that he would prefer to handle such affairs to ensure that he would not have to suffer whatever Will forgot.

Will was of no use here. All he would find himself doing over the next two hours was stand about and look particularly useless and bored. With that argument, it would make sense for Will to go off on his own for a time; remove his presence from those easily irritated by stagnation.

"You seem consumed by your thoughts."

Will started and jumped away from the tree, opening his eyes to come face to face with Hannibal's bemused expression. "Oh."

"Sleepless nights do wonders for your equanimity," Hannibal teased, leaning against the tree Will had leapt from moments before.

"How do you know I didn't sleep?" Will blurted out defensively. He shut his eyes in embarrassment as soon as the words left him, groaning. "Forgive me. No, I didn't sleep."

Hannibal made a sound of amusement. "It wasn't hard to tell, I'm afraid. Now tell me, why do you look so torn? It seemed as though you were debating with yourself."

Will pursed his lips and kicked at the ground. "You can pretend you aren't able to read me sometimes, you know. Allow me to retain some mystery."

"Were you to retain no mystery, I would not find you as fascinating as I do."

Will's cheeks flushed scarlet and he ducked his head further. "Honestly, Hannibal. There are soldiers about."

Hannibal leaned forward, a conspiratory look about him. His face was mere inches from the young man in front of him. "Perhaps we should give them something to talk about." His eyes were locked with Will's, dark and tempting.

Will felt the blood rush past his ears in a wave and he spluttered, stepping back. He glared as Hannibal laughed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh, you're terribly funny, you know."

"I know."

The young Roman rolled his eyes and looked down the road into the city. "The decision you mentioned." He sucked in air between his teeth and shifted guiltily. "There's an academy here."

Hannibal nodded. "I am aware. I've been there."

Will's eyebrows shot up and he looked back. His excitement boiled up in spite of himself. "Truly? You've been there?"

Hannibal's smile showed teeth and it was a charming sight. "Truly, Will. I told you that I've traveled. Does it surprise you so that I would seek out places of knowledge?"

"What? No, not at all." Will shook his head emphatically, horrified that he may have given the wrong impression with his surprise. "I was pleased to hear it. Maybe you can tell me about it."

"Why tell you when I can show you?"

Will chewed his lip and his eyes darted around to catch sight of Caeso. The man had vanished.

"You've not been forbidden to wander, I'm sure."

Will hesitated. "No, but…"

"The auxilia is equally aware of the urgency of our travels, I promise you," Hannibal assured him. "The academy is not far. We will return before anyone even notices our departure."

It was easy to be convinced by Hannibal. Will mused about how smoothly the other man could persuade him. He had done so time and time again—their talks, their training, all of their time together. Hannibal had spun it all so effortlessly. Will wasn't entirely certain if it made him feel puppeteered or taken care of. Whichever it was, he found himself falling into step next to the Persian just as he had in all the previous moments of his surrender.

It wouldn't be a drastic stretch of the truth to say that Will would likely do whatever Hannibal asked of him with little more than a nervous wringing of hands and vain protests.

He didn't want to think to strongly on why that might be.

Hannibal made no move to come close to Will again during their walk, keeping a respectfully discreet distance between them. They made small talk as they went. Hannibal pointed out small shops here and there, detailing his past visits to Tarsus and telling Will tales of the people he had met here. Will found himself lulled into a soft and hazy state, the lullaby of Hannibal's voice and his stories allowing him to drift.

When they approached a large building of stone and pillars and crackling dust, Will's eyes grew wide and bright. "This is it," he breathed. He made no effort to cover his enthusiasm in this as he would have with the other legionaries. Soldiers would judge him for this fascination. They would think of it as weak or nonsensical. Though it would be unjust to claim all men of the legion were ignorant of intellectual pursuits, it was far more common to find a man of the military eager to praise brawn over brain any day. They respected intelligence of their own kind; that of strategy and scenario. Philosophy was a foreign word to many of the men Will knew.

Hannibal was different. Standing next to him, Will felt no shame in displaying his zeal. If anything, it seemed as though Will's avid attention towards the building before them only served to please Hannibal further. Will felt curious if he could ever truly do anything to displease the other man. The thought that it might be impossible made him want to laugh like a spoiled child.

"Can we go in?"

Hannibal chuckled and pressed his hand to the back of Will's shoulders, propelling him forward. "You do not need to ask for permission."

Will ignored the shudder along his spine and nearly stormed up the stairs, catching himself halfway and forcing his gait into something more respectable and adult. He was not some wayward youth on a vacation. It would do to act like a soldier, even if he didn't feel like one. Will shrugged off Hannibal's raised brow as he straightened his posture and rest a palm on the hilt of his gladius. Then, when he felt as presentable as he would ever be, he gently pushed open the heavy door to the academy.

The smell that washed over him was one Will had missed with an intensity he hadn't realized. Books. Parchment. Scrolls. The heady and earthy scent of papyrus drifted through the air with a heavy musk and Will breathed deep. To him, it smelled like happiness. It took him to the moments where he had studied to become a medic, learning under old and wizened tutors who held a cornucopia of knowledge within their heads. Will had drowned in learning and intrigue in those days. His mind had felt full and satisfied.

Now, as he trudged through dirt and muck and surrounded himself with blood and sweat, he felt his mind crumbling like the stone of the building that now cocooned him in its sympathetic arms.

Will only managed to realize he had frozen on the spot when Hannibal's hand was at his back again, urging him forward. Will followed his lead as the older man sought out a scholar, politely requesting access to the library. The man assented, eyeing the pair curiously, and directed them through a tremendous archway across the corridor.

Will's eyes soaked up the antiquity of the place. Splendid paintings and elegant busts lined the hall. A crafted window accented by a stone bench allowed for readers to sit by the garden as they perused the tomes and scrolls. A few men wandered about in the silence, robes on their backs and contemplation in their eyes.

"I would talk to them all, if it was my say," Will murmured.

"Then I wish that it was your say," Hannibal whispered back. They kept their voices low so no one would be disturbed.

Will felt a swell of gratefulness choke at his throat and he smiled, reaching out to lightly grab Hannibal's wrist in a show of thanks. It was an intimate gesture; one that was shared between lovers rather than friends. Will quickly let his hand drop back before they would be noticed, but it had been long enough for Hannibal's eyes to spark and a smile to pull at his lips.

"I'm watching the time," Hannibal said. "Lose yourself for a moment. I promise to bring you back to reality when I must."

"I'm not sure I trust you to do so. It seems to me that you'd rather see me enthralled for eternity than back to responsibility." Will grinned.

Hannibal looked at him for a long moment, the air between them thick and heavy. "You would not be mistaken, but I will not give in to that temptation today."

A stuttered swallow and Will was turning back towards the books. "I just want to look for a moment."

"I implore you to do so."

Will almost spoke again, wanting to ask how Hannibal found such pleasure in allowing Will this moment of reprieve, but he bit back the question and stepped away towards the shelves. Libraries were still a rarity in Rome. Though Caesar had been the one to bring libraries forward in their society, they were still considered something defined by wealth and standing. Everything was written by hand, requiring a great many scribes and slaves. Books were not easy to come by and to hold a collection worthy enough to be called a library was a feat.

He ran his fingertips over a leather bound tome, wondering what the contents might be. It looked familiar. Perhaps a recreation of one of the works of Homer. The Greek's work was popular in Rome.

"Rarely do I find men of the sword in my academy."

Will looked up, snatching his hand back as though being caught out as a thief. He bowed his head. "I apologize for the intrusion."

The man who had spoken was elderly and had one of the softest smiles Will had ever seen. He shook his head and walked over, picking up the book Will had been inspecting. He ran his palm over the soft leather. "My boy, you walk within this place as though it is holy. Such respect is no intrusion."

Will's shoulders relaxed. "I was fond of study before I enlisted. It sorrows me to find my life void of it now."

The man nodded solemnly, but his eyes bore no pity and Will was grateful for that. "It is a sad life we live that old men like me must watch brilliant young minds stride into battle." He sighed and set the book back on the shelf. "Wasteful indeed."

Will knew he should be offended that his life as a soldier had been called a waste, but he couldn't help but agree. "War is an unavoidable circumstance."

"Such is the nature of man, I'm afraid."

"We would not have the empire we do today without the legion." Will's defense of the military was half-hearted at best. It was expected of him to defend the honor of his craft. The scholar would know as much.

The old man nodded agreeably and steepled his fingers together. "You are quite right. Peace is but a wishful and naïve dream of children. It is on blood that the empire has laid its stonework, but it is the minds of those who live among that stone that keep the stone from crumbling, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm not sure I'm worthy of deeming who deserves to lay the stone and who deserves to preserve it," Will said hesitantly. "I'm nowhere near important enough to hold that judgment."

"No one man is important enough to make such a judgment, my boy." The man gestured and began walking towards the garden. Will followed, glancing over his shoulder to see Hannibal watching them intently. He blinked and turned back around. The intensity of Hannibal's gaze was throwing him off-center.

"Have you always been a scholar?" Will grimaced at his own phrasing, knowing the implication was there.

"I have never been a soldier, so I cannot say I understand the life firsthand," the man admitted, smiling to show he took no offense. "My life has been a quiet one and filled with stories and philosophy. Occasionally I regret not having action color the pages of my own story."

Will raised his eyebrows at that. "Truly? I would think you glad to have escaped such a thing."

"Would you be glad to?"

"In part, but I suppose I can never truly know what my life would have been in other circumstances."

"The curse of time. As much as we wish otherwise, it flows but in one direction and our only ability lies in following the current."

Will adjusted the strap of his satchel and admired the flowers of the garden. He licked his chapped lips and frowned. “If you were taken from all these books—from this place—how would you keep your mind alive? Would you fade?”

The man hummed in thought, resting his palms at his back as he observed the garden as well. “Do you find your mind fading, my young friend?”

Will looked to the side and met the other man’s eyes. It wasn’t the most polite thing to do, but his concern for an answer overwhelmed his need for propriety. One did not often look strangers head on as though they were comrades. “I feel a constant lack of anything beyond the concrete. The earth, the air, the elements. They surround me and demand all of my focus. Inward thought becomes a strain.”

“You miss the allure of the abstract.” It was not a question, but Will nodded anyway. “And have you no books to take with you on this journey?”

“Some, but they’ve been read so thin I fear the papyrus will crumble every time I touch them.”

“Then perhaps your answer lies not in physical objects,” the man suggested. At Will’s confused frown, he winked and gestured back towards Hannibal. “Companions. Were one man to remain on the earth with all the writings of the world at his fingertips, he would glean nothing from the text. Without those around us to forward the thoughts, knowledge becomes pointless. We must discuss, converse, debate. The stories of our history are not kept alive in scrolls, dear boy. They are kept alive in the act of sharing them.”

“You suggest I combat my problems simply by talking?” Will rubbed at his forearms and considered the notion. “Is that not another form of regurgitation?”

“What you give will not be what you get.” The man shrugged and Will was surprised by how graceful the action was made to look. “Conversation is an act of reciprocity. Your friend here has a look that tells me he has seen the world.”

“He has.”

“Then allow him to share it with you. What I have learned from others has always outweighed what I have learned from my books.”

Will sighed. “I fear I would not be able to return knowledge that is any equivalent of what I would receive.”

The man’s eyes crinkled into a smile. “Your mind is not as dry as you perceive it to be, young soldier. There is a fire within your chest that warms this place even as we speak. Do no mistake your fervor for the beating of your heart.”

Will wanted to believe him, but the cynic in the back of his mind was biting at the edge of his thoughts. “What makes you so certain?”

“In the years spared me from not going to war, I have spent time with the people around me. I have met many soldiers. You are no grunt. He knows this.” Yet another gesture towards Hannibal and Will refused to follow the action. He didn’t want to know how Hannibal was looking at him now. It would be entirely distracting, he was sure of it. “Take one of my books.”

Will fixed the scholar with a shocked look. “What?”

“As a favor to me,” the man insisted. “I wish for one of my books to explore the world. Allow it to give you company and inspire further conversation for you. It would please me.”

Will balked. “I can’t possibly—“

“Don’t refuse the wish of an old man.” A smile and a nod and the man was ushering Will towards the books.

Groaning, Will knew there was no way he could refuse this. It would be unforgivably rude. “I don’t know what to take.”

“There must be something you instinctually desire.”

“I…” Will trailed off and risked a look at Hannibal. Just as he expected, the look in Hannibal’s eyes was still there—dark and probing. Will felt like his very soul was being examined. He looked away. Suddenly, he had an idea. “Do you have any books from Persia?” He saw Hannibal shift in surprise out of the corner of his eye, but he kept his face focused on the scholar.

The old man had a thoughtful expression, looking upwards to search his memory. “Yes, yes, I have just the one. Wait here one moment.” He shuffled away through the shelves and Will felt a presence solidify behind him. Turning around, he saw Hannibal looking at him with an unreadable expression, standing closer than he was before.

“Does my request offend you?”

Hannibal shook his head. “Not in the slightest. It intrigues me.”

Will chewed his lip. “Why?”

“I should be asking you the same question.”

Will opened his mouth to reply, but the scholar chose that moment to reappear from the stacks, a small book in hand.

“This is the one. Take this.”

Will accepted the book with a grateful bow and murmurs of thanks. It bore no writing on the cover and he placed it gently in his satchel. He would find out what it was later. For now, he just wanted to get back to the legion and escape Hannibal’s stare.

“Thank you for humoring us,” Hannibal said courteously, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder. “As much as I know my friend wants to stay, we must return.”

The man nodded as though he had known precisely that already. “Yes, of course. I very much enjoyed your visit.”

Will smiled and thanked him again for the book. The man waved away his thanks, saying they were unnecessary, and shooed them out of the academy. Will allowed Hannibal to maneuver him down the stairs, hand still on his shoulder. He frowned when they did not walk back towards the legion, instead veering right into the alley between two shops.

“Hannibal, where are we going?” Will tried to pull from his grasp, but the hand remained firm, turning him left and right through the narrow curves between the buildings until they were alone from the drone of townsfolk and clatter of carts.

Finally, Hannibal let go and Will turned around, brow knit together. “What are we doing back here?”

Hannibal’s expression was as unreadable as it had been back in the academy and Will was beginning to fear that he had truly offended the man. His mind began to rattle with all the things he could have done wrong. Had it been foolish to request a book from Persia? It had been an impulsive decision. Will should have known it could have been taken poorly. He was moments away from gasping out a flurry of apologies when Hannibal’s palm slid up to cup his cheek. The words died in his throat.

“Why did you request that book?” Hannibal asked. His voice was soft and prodding. He did not sound displeased.

Will allowed an iota of tension to leave him, letting it spill away down his back and loosen his muscles in its wake. He leaned back against the wall behind him, looking up into Hannibal’s eyes and trying to pretend he didn’t realize how close he was. “I want to feel connected to you.” His eyes widened. That wasn’t what he had intended to say.

Hannibal brushed a thumb over Will’s cheekbone and the younger man shivered. “I am not defined by my country.”

“No, you’re not.” Will’s eyes narrowed as he searched Hannibal’s own, trying to find the right words. “But it’s a part of you. I want to know that part and if I’m entirely honest, I want to know the other parts too. You’re not the only one who finds someone intriguing, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s lips parted, an unmistakable look of shock filtering over his features. “Always endeavoring to take me by surprise, aren’t you?”

“I’m not trying to,” Will replied honestly. He leaned into the hand on his face before he could help it. It was warm. “Are you going to kiss me?” It was the first time he had ever broached this subject with Hannibal, but they were alone and Hannibal’s hand was warm and Will was feeling slightly delirious.

“I want to.” Hannibal leaned forward until their foreheads touched. Their breath mingled.

Will’s heart began to race. Once again, he felt foolish and young. “Then why don’t you?” He lifted a hand to press it to a firm chest. He could feel the faintest whisper of heat through the leather.

The Persian shut his eyes and let out a long, slow exhale. “Because we are running late.”

Will frowned and let his hand drop back. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Hannibal breathed out a chuckle and seemed to pull himself away with effort, straightening and standing a few paces away. “My dear Will, do you really think that if I kissed you I would be able to stop there?” His eyes locked on Will’s. “I would devour you.”

Will’s heartbeat leapt into a pound, thudding against his ribcage. “Oh.” He fidgeted against the wall and felt pinned by Hannibal’s gaze. The words were echoing in his skull.

I would devour you.

“I would be alright with that,” Will said unsteadily. He knew now was not the time or place, but his mind wasn’t as focused as it should be.

Hannibal laughed, but his eyes never left Will’s. “I do not want a moment like that to be dulled by the regret you’ll feel in returning late for our departure.”

Will shut his eyes and scrubbed his hands over his face, forcing himself to reel back into reality. “You’re right. I know you are.”

Hannibal stepped forward again, running his knuckles along Will’s jaw. “But I am pleased to discover how eager you are.”

Will flushed and pushed away from the wall, jamming his thumbs into the waist of his armor. “No reason to embarrass me.” He kicked his toe into the ground. “We should go back before I say something ridiculous.” He received no more than a nod and they made their way out of the alleys and back onto the street.

Will adjusted his lorica segmentata and wiped sweat from his forehead. He felt overheated and overwhelmed. He was half tempted to yell at Hannibal for having this effect on him, but it wasn’t as though the man had done something wrong. If anything, Will was frustrated that he hadn’t done more.

He knew that Hannibal was right. They needed to employ self-control. Such things had never been a problem for Will before. He had never had difficulty restraining his body; only his words.

But as he spent more and more time around Hannibal, he was finding that body and words were molding into one another. Sometimes he swore he could feel Hannibal’s words like a physical caress. It was unsettling and invigorating all at once.

His entire relationship with the auxilia captain was a contradiction.

By all accounts, they should not be walking together now. There was no reason they should be side by side, Will imagining what it would be like to kiss Hannibal and trying pathetically to make it look like he was imagining nothing of the sort. He wiped off the sweat on his palms and watched people walk by. No one spared them a second glance. They were just two soldiers in a city currently flooded by the legion. There was nothing special about them.

Will shook his head. The disinterest of passersby bothered him. They weren't two soldiers passing through. They weren't two plain men with no interesting story of note. They weren't just another pair in an endless line of swords and armor.

They were a Persian and a Roman. They were an experienced veteran and an insecure medic. They were two men dancing around interest and emotion and attraction and it was all so incredibly captivating that Will couldn't understand why no one was noticing them. He couldn't find any justifiable reason for no one to recognize the tension or catch the spark dancing between the two of them. It was all blatantly obvious to him, like a thrumming buzz in his ears and beneath his skin. They were so starkly contrasted against one another that it was like oil swirling over the top of water. They weren't meant to be combined and yet here they were.

And no one batted an eye.

The lack of acknowledgment made him feel like he was going insane.

The desire for that acknowledgement made him feel absolutely asinine.

"If I had known it would perturb you so greatly, I would have said nothing." Hannibal's tone was light, but his eyes were thin with concern.

Will hesitated as he felt how drawn his own face had become. He hadn't realized how frankly his thoughts had revealed themselves in his expression. "It's not that."

Hannibal said nothing, waiting patiently for an explanation.

Will sucked in a breath between his teeth and slowed their pace. He could see the soldiers down the road, readying carts to leave. "Don't you see how odd we are? You never acknowledge it." He bit his cheek and chanced a look at his companion. "Surely you know how unconventional this is."

"Conventional?" Hannibal seemed to find humor in the word. "I thought you discovered by now that my care for convention is lackluster at most."

Will shrugged. "Even so, you must know that whatever our relationship is, it's more than slightly out of the ordinary."

Hannibal sighed and gave a small nod. "Yes, I am aware," he acquiesced. "I am under no illusions that this is an interaction that can be classed as usual or commonplace. Then again, that might very well be one of the reasons I am so enticed."

Will felt a lump drop into his stomach and he scowled. “So it’s a conquest, then? A chase for something out of the ordinary that you can claim you’ve had?” There was an arm in front of his chest before he could blink, stopping his movement entirely. Reluctantly, he turned his gaze upward to meet Hannibal’s own.

“Absolutely not.” The words were spoken so emphatically that Will had to blink to absorb them.

“Are you so certain?”

Hannibal’s mouth was set into a firm line, leaving no room for question in his sincerity. “I am not all-knowing, Will. I will not claim to have every answer as to why I find myself so drawn to you, but I will say this once and hope you never ask me to say it again.” He waited until Will’s eyes were locked on his. “You are no conquest. I have had my fair fill of those and none of them held my attention as you do. Yes, there are lines drawn between us that will be clear to anyone who looks, but the lines are irrelevant to me. I have no concern for where you’re from or your allegiances. My interest lies entirely with you and you alone. I will accept nearly any question from you, Will.” Hannibal frowned and lowered the arm that blockaded Will’s chest. “But I beg you not to question whether or not I am earnest. I am. For whatever reason.”

Will had forgotten to breathe and took a moment to correct the mistake, running a hand through his hair. He shut his eyes and let Hannibal’s words filter into him. “Alright.” He planted his feet into the dirt resolutely. “I do believe you. Truly, I do. It’s not that I need reassurance. It’s just—“

“I know.” Hannibal cut him off gently, turning so they could continue their stroll towards the century. “You do not need to explain yourself to me, Will.”

“You should let me do so anyway, sometimes,” Will responded with an equally mild tone. “I force you to explain yourself so often. It’s only right you allow me to do you the same courtesy.”

Hannibal pursed his lips and thought on it for a moment. “Very well.”

“It’s not that I need reassurance,” Will tried again, doing his best to think before he spoke. “I’ve found this entire occurrence so startling that it’s hard for me not to question it. Sometimes I feel as though you simply appeared from smoke and enveloped me. It’s as though I breathe and you’re there, filling my lungs.”

Hannibal gave him a look. “You make it sound as though I’m choking you.”

“By all rights, you should be, but that’s just it.” Will lowered his voice as a few soldiers passed by, tossing inquisitive glances their way. “Instead of constricting, it’s dissolving. When I spend time with you, I feel as though you know me and I know you; as though we’ve had these walks and these conversations for years already. I am not an easily persuaded person, Hannibal, but you ask me to follow you and I find it feels more abnormal to say no then to simply follow along whichever path you decide to take me.” Will felt himself itch at the admission.

“That’s a dangerous thing to reveal, you know.” Hannibal was staring ahead, deep in thought. “Telling someone that they could ask whatever they wanted of you and you would likely follow without question.”

“I would question, but it is highly likely the questions would come as I was already falling into step.” Will laughed weakly.

“And you trust me not to abuse this power over your autonomy?”

“I have no other choice.”

“I don’t wish to control you, Will. I want your decisions to be your own.”

Will let himself smile and turned the look to Hannibal. “I could choose to stop—ignore the impact you seem to have on me.” His smile became a grin and he rolled his eyes heavenward. “But I don’t want to. Life has become a dreary, numbing mess. As startling as all of this might be, I have no desire to walk away. All I would be walking back to is blood and…” He pushed a thumb to his temple. “Inadequacy.”

Hannibal made a sound in the back of his throat and they came to a stop at the olive tree Will had found upon first entering Tarsus. “You value this for the titillation, then? The excitement?”

“For someone who has seen more battles than can be counted on both hands, excitement is hard to come by,” Will admitted. “You excite me. Most importantly, you excite my mind. You’ve made me think again, Hannibal. As you may have heard earlier, that’s been a difficult thing for me to find.”

“I’m flattered that you feel I can give you that.” And Hannibal truly did look flattered.

“I’m flattered you find me worth the time to give that to,” Will countered. He let his eyes meet Hannibal’s once more, feeling more confident than he had all day. The honesty between them was still entirely new to him. He savored it. “I may not know why you find me as interesting as you do, but I can’t deny that you’re beginning to convince me that your interest isn’t fleeting.”

“I see no purpose in fleeting interest.” A man from the auxilia was waving Hannibal over and he nodded to him. “Life is already fleeting. We know this better than most.” He fixed Will with a smile. “Death follows us with determination, Will. We have no decision in this. What we can decide is what we choose to follow in return.”

Will tugged at the strap of his pack. “And you’ve decided to follow me?”

Hannibal’s smile showed teeth for the second time that day and Will had to look away so he wouldn’t stare. “I have. It seems we’re preparing to leave. Alas, the beckon of responsibility.”

Will grinned and waved him away. “Go. I have to find Orion and help him finish counting the medical supplies.”

Hannibal did not bid him farewell as he left and Will was pleased that he didn't. Saying goodbye to Hannibal felt like a lie, even if it was temporary. Will grumbled at himself as he sought out Orion, cursing the convolution of his own thoughts.

It wasn't long before he found the other immunes elbow deep in a crate of bandages, cursing at some terrified looking legionary about how he hadn't found nearly enough bottles of salve. Will rolled his eyes and shooed the legionary away, helping Orion pack the crates onto a cart.

"Did he really not find enough salve?"

Orion snorted as he grabbed a sack of figs and tossed it next to the crates. "It will suffice, but the boy is insufferable."

"You think everyone is insufferable."

"You are the most insufferable of them all." Orion shoved another sack into Will's arms and rolled his eyes.

Will chuckled and continued to help the other man load the cart. "I make sincere efforts to be sufferable for you, Orion."

"Ah, well. I've tolerated you so far." Orion shrugged and sharpened a cold glare when the legionary came back with the requested salve. "Why in the world have you brought that salve?"

The legionary paled and looked at the items in his hands. "Y-you told me it wasn't enough, sir."

Orion snorted and gestured towards the cart. "Look at this. It's entirely full. Where do you expect me to put all that? Go, now, and find somewhere else to place it, boy."

The legionary made a defeated sound and sulked off with arms full of salve, looking appropriately dejected.

Will laughed. "Honestly, you're being terrible to him."

Orion let a rare smirk sneak past his lips. "Of course I am. The boy has the makings of a medic. He could rank immunes in a few years."

"I'm not certain if you're trying to ward him off or initiate him."

"That's for him to decide."

Will hummed in amusement, nodding to the handler of the cart when they were done loading it up. He reached into a sack and grabbed a piece of bread, ignoring the indignant look Orion shot his way. "I've not eaten."

"You cannot hope to instruct the men on their health when you have no regard for your own."

Will wondered if Orion realized how he often sounded like a chastising grandmother. “I know. I’m making efforts.”

“Yes, yes.” Orion was hefting his kit over his shoulder as he smacked Will on the chest. “Eat your bread and then check to be certain we have enough blankets. The winds will be cold on the coast. We’ll no doubt find men with hacking coughs before the week is out.”

Will sighed around a mouthful of bread. Orion was right. The mix of sleep deprivation, salty humidity, and cold night winds were going to leave more than a few men feeling ill by the time they reached Antioch. Luckily, Antioch was a city and would have more than enough in the way of proper medical facilities, but it was up to Will to make sure the soldiers survived to reach the facilities at all. To a noble, a cold meant curling up in bed for a few days as the servants fetched food and wine. To a soldier, a cold could lead to chronic symptoms and even death.

Will shoved some more bread into his mouth and checked over the stores. Orion had gotten more than enough supplies, ever cautious. Will smiled and waved over the scorned legionary, taking a moment to look upon the young man.

He was tall and lanky, with few muscles to speak of and hair cut short and neat. His face was obedient and nervous and Will felt a flare of pity for him. He looked so very young.

“What is your name?”

The legionary rubbed his arms and looked around for Orion. “I’m Augustus.”

Will’s eyebrows rose. “Powerful name.”

The boy ducked his head and shrugged. “My parents seemed to think so, I suppose.”

“How old are you, Augustus?”

“Twenty, sir.”

Will rolled his shoulders and tossed the legionary a piece of his bread. “No need for formality with me, Augustus. We’ll be working together, after all.”

“We will?”

Will gave him a curious look as they began following the carts. He bid a sad farewell to Tarsus in his mind as the departure commenced, wishing he could have stayed a few hours longer. “Are you not a man of medicine?”

Augustus blushed. “I wish to be. I was hoping master Orion would teach me, but I fear he finds me unpleasant.”

Will shook his head. “He finds air unpleasant, yet he breaths it regularly. He does not dislike you.”

“Truly?”

A nod. “Truly. You can learn a lot from him, Augustus, but the first lesson will need to be that Orion is a sour man and he will never not be sour. Accepting that will make everything much easier on you.”

Augustus chewed over the bread Will had given him, thoughtful. “You’ve known him long?”

“Some years,” Will replied. The road became a hill and Will helped steady the cart down the slope, bracing one hand on the horse and curling his fingers in its fur. “There, now. Steady.” Augustus rushed to the other side, eager to help. His enthusiasm forced Will to restrain a bark of laughter. “Why do you wish to become an immunes?”

“I want to save people.” Augustus’ answer was immediate and innocent. “My father died in battle. If more medics had been on the field, he might have lived.” He slipped in the gravel and tugged on the horse’s mane in the process. The horse let out a displeased whinny.

Will patted the horse’s face to calm it, cooing words of praise. “Noble goals,” he murmured. Truth be told, he felt despondent then. Augustus was idealistic and naïve. Once, many years ago, Will had wanted much the same—to help, to save, to heal—but years of battle and death had taught him one thing with resolute certainty.

What he did was not about saving lives. All he could hope to do was clean up the mess death left behind. All he could truly hope to accomplish was warding of the demons of the underworld for a bit longer; let the Greeks save their coins for another day.

In the end, Will knew that there was no glorious defiance of death. When men were meant to die, they died.

No man had any power to change that.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> "I don’t like this image you all seem to have of me being all that remains on the battlefield, standing amidst your corpses to live on alone.”

Salt outweighed the oxygen in this place. The wind was harsh and unforgiving as it carried the spray of the sea, slapping the men in their faces with stinging water and the tongue-thickening weight of humidity. Their trek was two days into its crawl and those thinly stretched moments had felt like an eternity.

Will licked at wind-chapped lips and squinted out over the bluff. The century had crowded against the face of the cliffs, eager to avoid the steep falls that dropped off to their right. The beach had transformed into jagged facings of rock that tumbled down into the relentless crashing of ocean waves. The wind roared up high and the sun scorched them as they found no protection from the stone.

It was grueling.

Will licked his lips again. They tasted of salt and he felt a vicious craving for a sip of water. He ignored it, knowing full well the effects of dehydration dragging into his throat were imagined. It was the illusion of the heat and spice of the sea. Many of the men had grown panicked at first, believing they were being drained entirely by the god of the sea for trespassing. The less superstitious among them feared illness and deprivation. It was all Will and Orion could do to keep the men consoled and sane.

Augustus had been a marvelous help throughout and Will found himself pleased by the thought that Orion had predicted his potential correctly. The boy was keen on comfort. He had a manner about him that the soldiers found soothing. It worked wonders on the delirious minds of men dried by salt from the outside in.

Will’s foot slipped on the harsh stone and he hissed through his teeth. His greaves had become a burden to his sore heels and every lift of his leg was taking its toll. Caeso had made well on his promise of haste thus far. The pace had been no less than ruthless and even Will, who prized his endurance as one of his few admirable physical qualities, was beginning to feel wan.

Augustus trotted up to him with the type of spring in his step that could only be found in youth and victory. It seemed the boy possessed both. “I’ve protected the stores,” he said proudly. His chest puffed under his armor. At Will’s dubious look, he deflated, looking unsure. “Orion said that we had to preserve the water. He said that the men were not dehydrated. The feelings are hauntings of the sea. *You* said.”

“We both said,” Will agreed, sighing. The legionary beside him had far too much energy for him to handle in that moment. He wanted to rest, but they had a good three hours before they could even consider making camp. “You’ve done remarkably well, Augustus. Truly.” He meant it, but the honesty of the statement did nothing to hide his exasperation.

“Then why are you cross with me?”

Will couldn’t help but liken the younger man to a child wanting praise from a parent. He wasn’t certain he enjoyed being on the opposite end of the comparison. He could barely be responsible for himself on any valuable level, let alone another person. “I’m not cross with you.” Will patted him on the shoulder in a placating gesture and hoped the action would suffice to quell nerves. “I am very, very tired.”

Augustus relaxed and smiled brightly. “Oh, I see! I’m tired too.”

Will raised an eyebrow.

“I know it may not seem like it,” Augustus amended with a small blush. “But if I didn’t move around like this and keep talking I’m entirely convinced I would fall from where I stand.”

“You’re keeping yourself awake.”

“In my own way.” Augustus looked ridiculously pleased at Will’s understanding.

Will thought the only way the boy could be more desperate for approval was if he begged for it outright. He sighed again, taking pity on him. “Then you should remain occupied. I know Orion was checking on men for limps. Soldiers often deny injured feet, believing it lowly to succumb to such menial injuries.” He rolled his shoulders and felt very much like a tutor. He almost enjoyed it. “But a denied ache can lead to infection or restrict the use of the limbs entirely. You should assist him. Observe the men to ensure no one has been stepping badly on rocks and pretending they haven’t.”

Augustus’ eyes lit up at being given a task, just as Will knew they would. He nodded enthusiastically and ran off. Will couldn’t help but laugh as he watched the young man stare awkwardly at the feet of the soldiers around him, trying to ignore the perturbed looks of confusion he received.

“Awfully duplicitous of you to send him off like that.”

Will glanced over his shoulder to find Valerian smirking down at him. The man’s helmet was nowhere to be found, presumably tossed onto a nearby cart, and his long hair was hanging in dull tendrils from a tie behind his head—face pale, eyes narrowed. He looked as drained as Will felt.

Will shrugged and faced forward again. “We do need to keep an eye on their walking with terrain like this. You know how wretched stone can be to a traveler.”

“And the fact that the necessary task freed you of his unnecessary exuberance is merely a convenient coincidence?” Valerian was amused and the mood struck Will in kind.

A laugh. “I cannot deny the outcome is desirable.” He shook his head with a tired smile as Valerian matched pace at his side. “When did we become old?”

“We aren’t old. We aren’t even thirty.”

“I’m not talking about our bodies.”

“Oh, so you’ve gone down one of your spiraling paths of brooding and morbidity.” Valerian sniffed and tapped Will playfully on the arm to show he meant no offense. “We are not as old and wise as you envision us to be, I’m afraid.”

“Older and wiser than that boy.” Will jerkily nodded towards Augustus, who was nervously warding off an irritated soldier who had grown tired of his feet being inspected. “I can’t decide if I hate him for his naivety or admire him.”

“Perhaps a bit of both,” Valerian suggested. “Envy is both admiration and ill-will coinciding, is it not?”

Will snorted. “You think I envy him?” He chewed his lip and contemplated the prospect. His shoulders fell when he realized that his companion was not too far from the truth. “Perhaps slightly. I wish I still saw the world as he did—still thought there was hope.”

The levity of the conversation fell from Valerian then and he frowned deeply, sticking Will with a probing look. “Is everything alright? You’re far more morose than usual.”

Will shrugged and lifted his foot tenderly over a fallen rock. “Tired, sore, and admittedly tense, I suppose. The closer we get to Antioch, the more I fear what will be asked of us upon arrival.”

A nod and the optio was staring out over the bluff, considering. “This is unlike wars we have faced in our service. This is more.”

The admittance had Will feeling tight in his chest and a nervous energy thrummed in his palms. He clenched his fists reflexively against the buzz under his skin. “With the emperor refusing to acknowledge military necessity, we could be facing chaos. We *are* facing chaos. My mind is wreaking havoc upon itself as it tries to come up with outcomes and solutions. I can think of no way for this to end easily for us.”

“It is not your position to consider such things,” Valerian said gently. It was no insult; merely a statement of fact. “Concerning yourself with the aspects of circumstance you cannot change will only lead you to insanity. You’re driving yourself mad, Will. I can see it in every bit of you.”

Will cursed himself inwardly for allowing his stress to become so apparent. He had never been skilled at hiding such things. He pondered with detachment if it could be taught. He said nothing, too busy chastising himself to think of a proper response.

Valerian sighed. “You’ve always been so full of thoughts. You’ve a deeper mind than any of us. Of that, I’m certain.” He glanced at Will and then over the bluff once more. “But you

allow yourself to be dragged within the depths far too often. You consume yourself like Ouroboros."

"Then with that comparison I will always rise from whatever depths I throw myself into." Will pressed out a half-grin and shook his head.

"You jest, but I fear." The frown was still evident on Valerian's face, but it had faded somewhat. Whether it had soothed from exhaustion or calm, it was unclear. "The phoenix rises from the ashes, but we are only men. I fear men cannot match the rebirth of beasts."

"You think my self-consumption lacks the possibility of being cyclical." Will dug the heel of his hand into his eyes, warding off encroaching sleep. As tired as he was, he appreciated Valerian for conversations like this. Even though it bordered on accusatory, it still bore a depth that few conversations held. Valerian was an intelligent man. Perhaps, in another life, he would have been a scholar or a politician. Will hoped for the former. He would never have found a friend in a politician. "That I will consume myself and have nothing left over, yes?"

"Yes."

"I can't make any promises in that respect," Will answered softly. As much as he preferred to give words of comfort, he didn't wish to lie. "My mind has always been a trap in its own right. I've not allowed it to ensnare me completely so far."

"I hope the pattern continues."

They walked silently for a long time after that, each man sunken into his own solitary realm of sore muscles and brittle bones. The wind whistled and the cliffs shivered and the dull tune of meditation was all that kept them standing.

Valerian broke the silence. "You need something to keep you grounded to the world." It was a tentative suggestion and the hesitation was very unlike him. It seemed he was speaking thoughts before they fully formed. Will had thought that was *his* specialty.

"In what way?"

Valerian made a discontented sound, displeased with his own words now that they floated out into the air. "I haven't thought it through. It seems like the only logical solution, even if the solution itself is vague. You need something to pull you from your mind on occasion. There will come a day when I'm not here to do so. There will come a day when Caeso isn't here." He appeared to regret the need to say the words but not the words themselves, wincing away into the horizon.

Will swallowed dryly. "Don't talk as though you're planning to die."

"A soldier is always planning to die."

"Then call yourself a man and not a soldier and stop being so damned pessimistic." Will scowled down at the ground and forced the guilt of his sharp words into the recesses of his mind. "And you sound as though I'm invincible. I don't like this image you all seem to have

of me being all that remains on the battlefield, standing amidst your corpses to live on alone." His teeth ground together.

"It's a romantic image. You can't deny that." Valerian's attempt at humor fell short. "Be it death or unpredictable nature of life, there will be times that your need for a foundation must be found elsewhere."

"You make it sound as though I use your friendship for personal benefit."

"All friendship is for personal benefit," Valerian countered. "I gain just as much from your friendship as you do from mine. It is an agreeably equal exchange, I assure you."

Will wanted to argue that he couldn't see how that was possible, but he did not. "I see no point. If none of you are around, I see no purpose in leaving the depths of thought."

Shock filtered across the amber of Valerian's eyes. "What could you possibly mean by that?"

Will chewed at his lips and childishly wondered if he could accidentally chew them off. "If there is no one of import to be physically present with, why be physically present at all?"

"You are not defined by those around you, Will."

Will frowned and discovered he felt no unease with his next words. They were as plain and simple a truth as anything he had ever known. "Yes. I am."

Valerian had no reply.

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It was late in the evening before conversation found its way to Will again.

He had finally found the blessing of rest an hour prior, filling his shrunken stomach with bread and curling alone into a cropping of rocks. His body throbbed with the ache of the journey and the respite of camp was dulled by the pain of it.

They had settled where the cliffs had plateaued. Flat facings had become traversable enough to spread out and lay tents. There were a spare few clusters of boulders scattered around and no vegetation in sight. It was all rock and stone and cold wind. It was not nearly ideal for a campsite, but the men were all but falling to their knees and Caeso had been forced to pull the century to a halt.

Will poked a stick into the small fire he had made and wrapped a pelt further around his legs. He had chosen, perhaps against his better judgment, not to go into a tent. The decision had an ulterior motive. Will, for once, made no effort to reject that within the private realm of his own thoughts. If he was outside and away from his fellow Romans, the likelihood that other company would show itself was much higher.

He had long since decided to stop denying he desired Hannibal's company. It was that very acceptance that brought a tired and pleased smile to his face when the man scattering through his thoughts rounded the side of the boulders to look at Will curiously.

Will mulled over the concept of Hannibal being able to read his mind.

“Is this some sort of effort to freeze yourself so you won’t be required to finish the voyage?”

Will laughed and nodded as Hannibal moved to sit beside him, taking the stick and stoking the fire himself. “You’ll freeze here too, if you stay.”

Hannibal placidly considered him for a moment and leaned back against the boulder. Their shoulders brushed. “Your pelt seems warm.” Blunt, unassuming, so very Hannibal.

Will’s cheeks flushed and he looked around. No one was in sight and the cropping of rocks obscured them from view entirely. Yet, despite the illusion of seclusion, anyone could round the corner and find two men sharing a blanket. Words might be said. Questions might be raised. Or nothing might happen at all.

Hannibal watched Will’s internal struggle and chuckled. “But I most likely won’t freeze,” he added. He was giving Will a way out of the suggestion. It was gratingly polite and almost obscenely devious. He knew full well of the younger man’s battles with futile guilt.

Will rolled his eyes at the blatant manipulation. “That’s not fair.”

Hannibal simply smiled. Will wanted to kiss him or shove him and he wasn’t sure which one he wanted more.

With a groan, the young Roman untucked the pelt from under his legs and lifted it up, gesturing for Hannibal to throw the free end over himself. Their legs touched briefly underneath—Persian cloth against bare skin—and Will shivered. “Pleased with yourself?”

Hannibal continued to smile, looking entirely content. “Very.”

Will decided he didn’t have the energy to kiss or shove anyone and forced himself to relax and lean more heavily into the stone. Their legs bumped again and the older of the two seemed not to notice at all. Will felt like all his blood had rushed to his face and turned to his pack in an effort to avoid being seen. He needed a distraction and so he pulled the book he had received in Tarsus from the leather of the pouch, running his thumbs over the hand-woven spine.

Hannibal noticed the movement and took the book from Will’s hands. If anyone else had done so, it would have seemed rude, but there was a casual gentleness to the way Hannibal handled Will in the quiet moments. Like one would handle a bird, he always stroked the feathers in the right direction. His calloused fingertips brushed over the inside of Will’s wrist. “Would you like to continue our reading?”

Will nodded, teeth digging into the inside of his cheek as he valiantly tried to ignore all points of contact between the two of them. It was ridiculous, truly, how flustered mere brushes of skin led him to be. He was no longer in his youth. This level of stimulation was nonsensical.

Hannibal gracefully said nothing about the state Will was in and flipped open the book. “In Persian or…” He let the decision hover and Will shut his eyes, deciding.

In the brief stops of camp since they had left Tarsus, Hannibal had made a point to read from the book the scholar had gifted Will. The book was intricate and delicate and adorned with detailed designs and elegant script. Will had opened it within hours of leaving the city, tense and excited to read whatever had been bestowed upon him, only to have his shoulders slump as he realized the text was entirely in Persian.

How lamentable it was, to have something so beautiful and no way to divine its contents. The book was as much as mystery to him as Hannibal himself was. It was almost appropriate.

He had told Hannibal as much the first night. The other man hadn't even hesitated before taking the book and beginning to translate it for him. He read in one language and spoke in another with such ease that Will became enamored by the skill it must have taken. It was an hour into the first reading that Will had realized he'd been paying no attention to the contents at all; so busy he had been drowning in the cadence of Hannibal's voice.

As punishment, Hannibal had started from the beginning without translation, reading out in a language that suited his tongue far more than anything Will had ever heard from him. The syllables coiled from his lips with natural purpose and it was enchanting to hear.

Twice now, Will had requested to hear the book in Persian. He found it calmed him, even if he gleaned no intellectual understanding of the tale.

"Persian, I think."

Hannibal huffed and shook his head with a smile. "You'll never have any idea what this book is about if you keep having me read it so."

Will returned the smile a cheeky show of teeth. "Maybe I prefer the mystery."

Hannibal regarded him with a raised brow for a moment before turning to the book and flipping through the pages.

Will wanted to ask what he had stopped himself from saying. He didn't. It wasn't that he was afraid to ask Hannibal such a question. He was simply far too tired to partake of meaningful conversation. Perhaps Hannibal had realized that and held his tongue for such a reason. Even if there was no way of knowing the motive behind the silence, Will still found himself feeling grateful for the consideration—imagined as it may have been.

Generously, Hannibal began to fill the silence that was stewing over the clifftop, the lilt of his words brushing against Will's face alongside the warmth of the fire. He read for what felt like an eternity and before reality could fight for the right to awareness, Will was deep into the depths of his own dreams.

The air smelled of metal and salt.

Will's stomach dropped. He felt hollowed out as though someone had dug from his belly. His hands clenched at his stomach and he heaved out the stress through gasping breaths of air.

He was on the battlefield again. He knew this place. It was all blood and rank and death. Some part of him knew that this wasn't a real place. He hadn't realized it before and he cursed himself for the ignorance.

There were bodies everywhere. Piles upon piles of corpses covered the field. Flesh rotted and dripped into itself and Will's stomach heaved again.

This was not like the battlefield he had been to before where he had held a dying Hannibal in his arms.

This place was old and stale and reeked of decay. The dead of this place had been exposed to the elements and to time. Will's eyes scanned the ground and he let out a strained groan when he realized that his assumption had been wrong. This was the same place.

It was the aftermath.

Hannibal's body was weak and cold on the ground. He was unmoving and bloated. His face was stained with the caking of dried blood and dirt kicked up by the few survivors that had managed to crawl from this wretched place.

Will sniffed and his eyes burned from the smell and emotion. He knew this wasn't real. It wasn't possible.

He knelt in spite of the shouting of his coherent mind, placed two fingertips lightly over the shoulder of Hannibal's armor to find some kind of connection, bowed his head and wept silent tears.

This wasn't real.

But it could be.

He recognized now the feeling that had torn him apart the first time he had been dragged to this place. It was that tearing in his gut—the emptiness. He was astonished he hadn't recognized it before. He sniffed again and rancid odors stung his insides. This wasn't the kind of place he wanted to find any sort of clarity. He tried to kick the understanding away.

His fingers pressed more firmly into the leather of Hannibal's armor and his other hand clawed into his own stomach. He would rip the feeling out, if he could.

Seeing Hannibal dead like this was like watching a piece of his own body butchered in front of his very eyes. He felt like a limb was lying there before him. Someone had taken his arm and cut it bloody and laid it before his feet so he could watch it rot. That was the feeling. Amputation. Disconnection. Loss of self.

It afforded him a new understanding of his dependency of Hannibal. That's what it was, after all. Dependency. Without effort or intention, Hannibal had become a source of stability for Will. He had become the mirror in which Will saw the person he wanted to be. Will knew that if he looked closely enough, he would see the same parallel in Hannibal's eyes. They were representations of one another's innermost thoughts.

Will felt entirely foolish for having not recognized it before now.

It explained so much. He grit his teeth together and tore his eyes away from Hannibal's glassy expression as it stared endlessly into the gray sky. They were one another's counterpart. They were the balance on each side of the scale. The mere concept of Hannibal falling off the scale into death was enough to make Will feel like tumbling over.

He couldn't understand how he had survived until this point without the weighted balance of the other man. It was possible he hadn't managed as he thought he had. Images of self-doubt and regret fluttered in his vision. Will had always felt lost. He yearned for cause and purpose. He ached for a reason to feel real and pertinent.

Hannibal gave him that.

When Hannibal looked at him, Will was the only person who existed. He was an absolute. He was of categorical value.

Perhaps it should have frightened Will how much he needed that acknowledgment. It did, a little. He knew how dangerous it was to find oneself wholly reliant on another's acceptance. His father would have argued that Will's value of himself should always outweigh the value others put in him.

Will would have agreed, until he met Hannibal.

He had been floating through his life, following the paths that had been set down in front of him by others, and he had always wondered what it would be like to exist as someone other than who he was. At times, Will felt like his own ghost.

Hannibal's veneration made him feel real.

His fingertips were still pressed into blood-roughened leather. He could feel the cracks of dried gore flaking away from the tan, but made no effort to pull his hand away. The contact, however deprived, made him feel grounded to the earth. If he let go, it was entirely possible he would fall off of the world entirely. He would be aimless.

Perhaps, if he sat there long enough—*waited* long enough—Hannibal's dark eyes would regain their depth and his cheeks would lose their pallor. He would awaken and he and Will would walk together from this place.

Will knew this wasn't real. And yet he waited.

The buzz of flies swarming over carcasses made for a cacophony that allowed him to drift. Wind rustled over the debris and torn shreds of armor hanging from limp limbs. A beast growled in the distance, most likely declaring ownership of the meat of a fallen friend or foe. Will found his thoughts tempered by the music of death.

The shouts seemed distant at first.

They were an itching at the side of conscious thought. A jab of sound and a yell and Will twitched towards the noise, fingers jerking on the shoulder of Hannibal's armor. Then, the

shouts came again and Will shocked awake, breathing heavily and blinking away the images of slaughter.

The shouts were real, he realized with growing trepidation. He looked helplessly to his side only to find that Hannibal had long since risen, standing at the edge of the boulders with his hand placed in a lean and legs squarely poised for action. He was tense and prepared and Will felt the sight send a chill down his spine and settle like ice in his gut.

Blearily, he rubbed at his eyes and stood. The fire had faded to embers and he tossed the pelt beside it carelessly, joining Hannibal in caution. “What’s happened?” His hand automatically went to the hilt of his gladius. If they were being attacked, he had to be ready.

Hannibal shook his head and looked back out over the encampment. “I’m uncertain.”

Will relaxed minutely. Surely if they were being attacked there would be more shouting. Hannibal would be readying his blade. As it was, the shouts had died down into a roar of a few men arguing heatedly near the cliffside. Caeso was among them. “Are they arguing?” Will squinted and tried to make out the expressions of the men by the cliff. A cursory glance around saw the rest of the soldiers and auxilia doing the same, all looking equally perplexed and unsettled. No one knew what was happening.

Caeso shouted something and grabbed the arm of another soldier as he moved to look over the side of the drop. The crashing of the ocean waves padded their voices, making it impossible to understand them.

Will swallowed. “I should go over there,” he murmured. “See what’s wrong.”

To Will’s surprise, Hannibal placed a palm to his chest as he tried to move forward, stopping him. “It is neither your duty or your obligation to interfere here. The situation is tense. Don’t insert yourself into it, Will.”

Will immediately bristled, feeling belittled. “I’m no mere legionary. I may not be an officer, but I do bear rank. I can offer assistance. As an immunes I’m viewed as a balm—“

“*Will*.”

Hannibal’s voice had taken a tone that Will had never heard from him before; firm, authoritative, steady as stone. It stunned Will into stillness. He grit his teeth together and stared at the ground. “Yes?”

Hannibal’s hand moved from chest to shoulder, shifting from commanding to sympathetic in an instant. “I do not doubt the degree of your influence.” He pressed into the shoulder in an urge for Will to meet his eyes. The request was left unmet. He sighed. “My plea is not in question of your abilities or relevance, but in their capacity to respect that relevance in their current state.” He gestured towards the men by the cliff. Caeso and the soldier he had grabbed were still shouting and red-faced. One man had his face in his hands. The other two were now standing off to the side and staring across the sea. “Call me selfish if you must, but I don’t enjoy the idea of you approaching angry men standing next to a dangerous drop.”

Will's shoulders slumped and he finally met Hannibal's eyes with his own. "You were worried for my safety."

"It only takes one moment of rash action to end in permanence. If you wish to help, I ask you wait until they have calmed." Hannibal frowned and he dropped his hand away. "I know I have no claim to you to justify such a request, but I'm going to make it, nonetheless."

Will moved to reach for the retracting hand before he caught himself. They were not tucked away in the privacy of the stone any longer and the men surrounding them were far too alert for his liking. "You may have no formal claim," Will said carefully, chewing his lip as he picked his words as delicately as he would shrapnel from a wound. "But you have enough of one for me to acquiesce." He crossed his arms over his chest and watched as Caeso calmed the angry soldier, looking exhausted and frustrated. "I will wait." He didn't look to see Hannibal's expression as the man shifted and stood taller beside him, but he could tell he was pleased.

They stood there for some time before they spoke again, watching and waiting for whatever had taken place to pass. Will was the one who broke the silence as the men began to disperse from the cliffs and returned to their respective tents. Caeso began walking towards them.

"You shouldn't be fearing for my life."

Hannibal looked at him. He said nothing.

Will didn't look back. "If you fear for my life, you've doomed us. As a soldier, you know this."

Hannibal hummed in thought. "Any argument I could make would be unforgivably arrogant."

Will sniffed and let a humorless chuckle escape him. "You're suggesting I fear your death."

"I wouldn't be so bold as to place such worth upon myself."

"If I feared your death and you feared mine, it would make us both irreversibly foolish."

"It would."

Caeso was upon them now and he fixed Hannibal with a wary stare before forcing his mistrust back in favor of turning to Will. "I must speak with you."

Hannibal moved to depart, but a hasty slice of Will's arm through the air held him fast. Will felt a stab of irritation cut through his chest like a splinter. He could not allow Caeso to regress into his discriminations. He would not allow Hannibal to be cast off as an outsider. If he allowed it once, it would become habitual. Will couldn't bear the thought. "I would likely tell him whatever it is you have to report," he said honestly, not missing the flash of pain in his friend's eyes. "Unless it's a personal matter between us. Is it?"

Caeso grimaced. "I must admit your confession is somewhat concerning, but no, this is not a personal matter, per se. If you wish him to remain, so be it. It is a Roman matter but his awareness would likely cause no…" He swallowed thickly. "Vexation."

If Hannibal was offended by Caeso's comment, he chose not to make it known.

Will took a similar tack. "Please, Caeso. What happened?"

The legatus' face was more drawn than it had been in some time. The life of him seemed enervated. "There was an accident. I fear it may come as a shock to you."

The hollowness was back. It was at the base of Will's spine, in the dip of his throat, behind his eyes. He felt emptiness threatening the boundaries as though his body was preparing for sleep. It was the numbness that accompanied the knowledge that one was about to hear something terrible. "What's happened?"

Caeso hesitated. The hesitation did nothing to soothe Will's raw nerves. "You an Orion were noticed to have taken on an apprentice in recent days, yes?"

Will's eyes narrowed. "Augustus, yes. We met but days ago. He has great potential."

Caeso let out a woefully laden breath and rubbed a hand across his temple. His red hair looked flat and faded. "It seems in his tired state he was careless. He wandered too close to the cliff. One of the men tried to stop him, but he noticed far too late to be of use."

Will's face was blank. His mind was quiet. "He fell."

A nod. "He fell. Some of the men argued that we should seek him—descend the cliffs and search the waters."

"The waves are far too violent for such efforts," Hannibal interjected knowingly. "Any attempts to retrieve what would surely only be his body would subject your men to the dangers of the sea and require time that we do not possess."

Caeso made a noise of agreement and looked over his shoulder where Augustus had presumably met his end.

In that moment, Will marveled as he watched two leaders take on the burden of accepting an unfortunate loss. Their experience bled through to one another. It was an understanding only reached from watching your own men die and knowing that you had to move on, keep giving orders, accept that there was no possible way to dignify them all the way they deserved. For that brief pause, he saw unadulterated respect between the two and it made Will feel small.

"I'm sorry, Will." Caeso was hovering back. It seemed Hannibal's presence caused him to vacillate. Whether it was out of respect to Will's apparent reliance on him or insecurity over his current value, Will couldn't be certain. "I did not know him well."

"Neither did I." Will shrugged and immediately regretted the coldness of the action, but couldn't find it within himself to make reparations. "As I said. I met him but days ago. He was a naïve and pleasant boy, but I did not know him well enough to have any right to mourn him."

Caeso looked reluctant to say more. The concern in his face made Will feel unsteady and scrutinized. He turned away. "Thank you for telling me. Truly. I lament that this happened,

but I don't think I have anything more to say on the matter. I'm going to sleep." He didn't want to see the disappointment on Caeso's face as he left to return to the cropping of rocks. He simply wanted to start up the fire and go back to sleep.

Hannibal returned a few moments later and Will was surprised that this surprised him. He had half expected Hannibal to return to the auxilia and leave him be, but hindsight found the expectation to be an irrational one.

"I'm fine."

"You're not." Hannibal's argument was simple and pointed and it perturbed Will immensely.

"And why shouldn't I be?" His voice was haggard and rough. "He was just some boy. I didn't know him and I've seen plenty of boys die. This is nothing especially shocking."

"You've seen boys die in battle," Hannibal corrected gently. "This was no battle. This was happenstance. Soldiers fully expect to die and see death in battle. It is our normality. Falling from the cliff in the safety and silence of night is not. You are right to be disquieted." He returned to his place next to Will, leaving a respectful space between them so the younger man would not feel overwhelmed.

"He bothered me today." Will wasn't sure if it was what he had meant to admit, but it was the admission that wanted to make itself known. "He was happy and pleasant and eager and it bothered me." He felt his face warm with guilt and regret and he placed his head on his knees, muttering the final words to the ground. "I had simply wanted him to go away and leave me to my misery and cynicism. I found him foolish and I even anticipated—" He bit the inside of his cheek and shut his eyes. "I was nearly impatient for the day that—" He cut himself off once more, unable to finish the sentence.

"You found yourself wishing for the time that his naivety would be taken from him." Hannibal's words were calm and quiet. He was neither disgusted nor appalled. He understood. "You could not find it within yourself to respect the gaiety of his youth and in that frustration you wished pain upon him so that he would be wizened. It's not unusual."

"It may not be unusual, but it's cruel," Will spat. "I wished for him to suffer in order to learn and he had spent that entire time respecting and admiring me. He wanted to please me and in turn I wanted him be smartened by unpleasantness. He died without reason or purpose. He had desires that I used to have and instead of me wishing good upon him…" He hissed in air through his teeth and stopped talking. His words were aimless.

"His death is not your fault. Your thoughts did not push him over that cliff." Hannibal reached out slowly, ready to pull back at the first sign of rejection. When Will made no move away from him, he pressed his fingers into the Roman's dark curls and massaged his scalp. "You wanted what was best for him. You wished for him to understand the world so he could be better prepared. That is admirable and mature."

"That's not what upset me. Not really." Will labored over his thoughts, debating on the wisdom of revealing them to the reality of the night. Eventually, he chose to speak. "I am not upset that he died. In the end, he's just another face in a row of lost faces so long it would

blot the sunrise into darkness. I'm not even convinced of why I'm upset. I don't know if I can put it into words."

Hannibal carded his fingers reassuringly through Will's hair. "You were given the opportunity to influence someone and that was taken away from you."

Will started, looking up with wide eyes at what felt punishingly lacking of accusation.

Hannibal looked unphased. "There is no reason for you to be ashamed of this, Will. You have had precious little control over your life. This boy presented you with the opportunity to take control you had never been given before. He showed a willingness to be reliant on you. It's human nature to clutch to someone else's reliance. It gives a sense of purpose and power."

Will's mouth was dry. Hannibal's hand on his head felt heavy and warm. His chest felt tight and twisted. "You think I wanted the power from being his mentor? That it's the loss of that power I mourn? That makes me out to be something awful."

"Does it?" Hannibal's eyebrows rose as he stared at the fire, hand never leaving Will's hair. "I don't believe that it does. Power is the path to self-reliance, to independence, to success. Are those not things you have desired?"

Will's mouth flapped uselessly and he frowned. "It would be a lie to say it's not something I've wanted. Independence."

"You've defined yourself by those around you," Hannibal replied. His voice was matching the beat of the waves against the cliffs. It was steady. "It's not beyond understanding that you would relish the opportunity to have others define themselves by you."

"Reciprocity? Or do you think I believe the world owes me something?"

"Life is an equal give and take. There is a balance to things. You have just as much right to take things for yourself as you do to give of yourself."

"I felt control that I had lost in my life returned upon the reveal of his reliance on me."

"Yes."

"By all accounts, this makes my current misery deplorably selfish."

"Selfishness is a human necessity."

"Not by Roman standards."

Hannibal chuckled. "No, by Roman standards it is always for the best for the empire. The best for your community. The best for the capital."

Will blinked into the dancing flames of the fire. He thought he heard a bird fly overhead but knew he must have imagined it. "Is it so different in Persia? This importance of self?"

“Not in any significant aspect, no.” Hannibal let his hand slide from hair to rest on Will’s knee over the pelt. Will shivered, but gave no objections. They leaned closer to one another until shoulders were brushing once more. “I confess that this opinion resides mostly within myself.”

“Then how can I trust its value?”

Hannibal squeezed the knee under his hand. “That is entirely up to you, my dear Will. Do you feel my words hold seeds of truth?”

Will’s breath came out in a huff of air; a mixture of his disbelief at the conversation and the feeling of Hannibal’s hand resting warmly on his leg. “Are you trying to plant things into my mind?”

“Seeds never take to unwilling soil. Nothing can grow where the land does not allow it.”

Will’s frown had faded into a deeply contemplative line as he stared unblinkingly into the fire. “I doubt I can convince you that your words hold no truth for me.”

“I will always welcome the attempt.”

Will shifted until his entire side was leaning its weight into the man next to him. “And if I make no attempt?”

Hannibal smiled. “Rest, Will. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> "Better to risk death for freedom than never obtain freedom at all."

Chapter Notes

> As usual, sorry about the delay. I'm thinking of quitting my job and school and running into the mountains to become a bearded mountain man who fights bears and writes fanfiction. We'll see how it goes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something can be said of bereavement. If nothing else, it was unifying.

The senseless death of Augustus had drawn the men into a ruminating silence. The ever-present gripes and complaints of travel had faded away into the wind. No one dared to open their mouth and utter a claim of discontent. Whether out of solemn respect for the dead or a simple desire not to be the first to speak over the tune of loss, there was a solid state of pacification.

Will had been grateful for the silence at first. The lack of grumbling from his compatriots had been a pleasant rest from the perpetual state of unrest that had plagued them for so long. As soon as the thought had come, a wave of unbidden guilt had crushed it down to the very root. Despite Hannibal's placating words the previous night, Will could not help but feel a level of responsibility from the disconnect of his own sympathy for Augustus.

Will had been tempted to ask Hannibal to start training him in combat when they set camp once more, but the thought had fallen away as quickly as it had appeared. His body was aching and his mind even more so. What stamina had not been drained by the unforgiving stone had been sapped from him in a steady drip with every step he took away from the cliff that had claimed Augustus' life.

Likewise, he could not remain stagnant. He felt discontent to sit idle and so when Hannibal had suggested the following the night that they read from the book once more, he had vehemently refused, much to the bemused surprise of his companion.

"I feel decisively incognizant of your thoughts," Hannibal admitted with some hesitance. He was watching Will like one might watch a spooked foal. "Is everything alright?"

Will couldn't blame him for the hesitance. He knew full well how he must look—eyes wide and shoulders hunched and jittery. He was unable to restrain the tension. It vibrated from his very bones. "I've felt a remarkable lack of influence over recent events." He grimaced and tapped his fingers on his thighs as he stared into the fire.

They hadn't found as secluded a shelter as they had before. The cliffs had begun to branch back into beaches and plains and the majority of the landscape was brush and sand. Their private fire was in full view of the camps and Will had settled into it with anxiety. Blessedly, with the exception of a few questing eyes, no one had seen fit to question them. It was no longer a secret that Will and Hannibal had developed a friendship, of a sort. With the close quarters the century and auxilia were forced to take on their way to Antioch, there was little room left for any semblance of privacy. Will had heard distant whispers speculating on the nature of the friendship and he had to resist grinding his teeth at the color his fellow Romans had painted Hannibal in their gossip.

Their words had been judgmental and ignorant; hatred and mistrust bred from lineage and the prospects of war with Persia. He understood their trepidation, but the comprehension made the comments no less frustrating to hear.

The particular shade of submission they had cast over Will himself only made it worse. The envisioned him weak and helpless in Hannibal's thrall. It was offensive and infuriating, but Will knew his own portrayed demeanor was to blame. He made an effort to be silent and unobtrusive and his physical prowess was nothing to admire. It was only natural the men would assume certain things as they meandered through Will's personal affairs with careless rumor and infantile musings.

Thankfully, the talk had remained as such; only talk. No one had deemed it worth their time to approach either Will or Hannibal. There had yet to be confrontation. For now, they were content to let them be and watch curiously from afar.

The most likely reason for the respected privacy was that the men had known of Will's connection to Augustus and were treating him with the acknowledgment of a tutor losing a student—a mentor losing a pupil. They were allowing him the privilege to mourn as was custom. Will hadn't the heart to tell them he had no need for it. As he chewed his lip and considered his prospects, he discovered that he had only two genuine needs holding steady beneath his ribcage.

That of his lodestar. Of Hannibal.

And that of a desperate desire for distraction and purpose.

"How can I assist you?"

Will frowned. Hannibal's offer was so earnest and unassuming that he felt his own mind snap to the suggestion like the cracking of a branch. "There is nothing required of you." He knew his response came out tight and clipped, but he felt hardly capable of reigning in the rigidity.

Hannibal's brows knit together as he tried to translate the meaning of Will's words. Will was certain that this was the first time he had seen Hannibal so genuinely perplexed. The

observation nearly made him calm out of pity. Nearly.

“Will.” Hannibal paused and leaned forward on his knees, regarding Will carefully. “I do not find it to be a requirement. I want to assist you.” He licked his lips at the end of each sentence as though to taste their potential to drive Will further into frenzy.

“But what of your own desires?” Will groaned and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes to help him focus. “What I mean to say is what of your desires for *yourself*?”

“I must confess that you have caught me in a rare moment of obtuseness.” Hannibal smiled slightly; an attempt at levity to combat the obvious twitch in Will’s fingers. “You’ve been this way since we have made camp and I am struggling to discover a way to quell your nerves.”

Doubtful that Hannibal took enjoyment from admitting helplessness, Will made an attempt to verbalize himself properly. “I know.” He heaved a sigh and rubbed his eyes again. “Gods, I know. Forgive me. I don’t know what has come over me. I feel wound more tightly than the cords of my braces.” As if to demonstrate his point, he lifted his arms and began to untie the braces, letting them fall to the ground.

Hannibal chuckled. “I can see that.”

“What you said before.” Will scratched behind his ear and huffed out a childish breath, trying to comfort himself with superfluous noise. “That night.” He looked at Hannibal for confirmation that he understood and received a nod in return. “It helped me understand my own thoughts, but in turn it served to make me restless.”

“I am sorry if I caused this distress.”

“No, no.” Will waved his hands carelessly, the metallic grips of anxiety still holding firm. “It was a good thing, truly.” He thought of trying to set an insisting expression upon his companion, but he knew it would only appear to be manic at best. “But I cannot escape the wretchedness of passivity. I can accept what you told me about myself, but I cannot be passive about it.”

Hannibal hummed low in his throat and leaned back on his hands. “I see.”

Will wasn’t sure if Hannibal truly understood. He didn’t say so. “I suppose all I mean to say is that introspective thought is something I need to escape for a while.”

Dark eyes lit up in understanding. “You want some time out of your mind.”

Will grinned, pleased to know he was finally starting to make sense. “Yes. I think that’s it. I love reading the book, but it allows my mind to rest and wander. I don’t want it to rest. I don’t…”

“Want it to wander,” Hannibal offered. He pinched his lips together in thought. “I’m afraid I only have so many resources available to me. I would suggest we continue our training, but both of our bodies are past the point of ache.”

“I had similar thoughts.”

Hannibal made that humming sound in the back of his throat again and Will found that he enjoyed hearing it. They sat in silence for a moment, each considering a solution for the problem at hand. Just as Will was coming to the conclusion that there was nothing to be done, Hannibal spoke.

“Perhaps if I offer conversation,” he suggested vaguely. “I’m aware that it’s not much different than reading, but at least you will be able to have an equal give and take. Perhaps I can discuss something with you that will interest you enough to draw focus.”

Will worried his lower lip and stared at the Persian inquisitively. “I feel as though you have a specific topic in mind.”

“I do.” Despite the confirmation, Hannibal sat still for the longest bout of time. He said nothing more and gave no indication as to what he was planning.

Will began to feel a nervous anticipation.

After an indefinite stretch of silence, Hannibal sighed and lifted his arms to pull off his own bracers, revealing his tan arms to the moonlight. His skin was rich and warm in the waning colors of night, making him look as though he could fade entirely into the shadows if he so desired. Will’s eyes flickered to the spirals of ink on Hannibal’s forearms and the rivers of his mind began to pool together in understanding.

Will shook his head and even attempted to pick Hannibal’s bracers up from the ground. “No, you don’t have to tell me anything. I don’t know enough to presume, but I understand the topic is a painful one for you. This is not an equal exchange by any means.” He was shoving the leather back into Hannibal’s hands gracelessly.

Hannibal gently pried the bracers from Will’s hands and set them aside. “I know how you desire to trivialize your own struggles in order to justify your anger at being swayed by them at all.” Will opened his mouth to object, but the firm look Hannibal gave him pressed him to silence. “I’m not asking for admission. I also know that it’s entirely likely that you will continue to argue this until the subject has been all but eviscerated, so I will save you the trouble.”

Will grumbled under his breath but made no argument as Hannibal shifted around so they were facing one another, cross-legged.

“I wish to speak to you of my ḵālkubi because I feel that I know far more of you than you do of me,” Hannibal said smoothly. He ignored Will’s fractious mutterings with grace. “I *want* to share this with you, Will, if you’ll allow me.”

Will grimaced and hung his head. How was he supposed to refuse the plea when it was worded in such a fashion? Hannibal had a way of making favors to Will seem as though they were a fine privilege Will had allowed Hannibal to partake of. Will’s acquiescence was treated as a rare wine that was meant to be savored. It was nigh impossible to reject such entreaties as they were presented. It made him feel like a delicacy traded only in noble markets. “I…” He sniffed and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. He distantly considered

having someone cut it in Antioch. Surely a tailor would have the tools. He shook his head to clear it. “What’s ḵālkubi?”

Hannibal bestowed Will with one of his beguiling smiles at the question, accepting the participation gladly. “It’s the word for these markings.” He gestured towards the coiled lines on his skin. “I’m afraid I do not know a word in your tongue. I’m not entirely certain you have one.”

Will shrugged. He didn’t know. Chewing his lip, he let his eyes rove over the markings. He had wondered about them from the moment he had met Hannibal, but the older man had made it clear early on that the topic was an unpleasant one. Now the possibility of learning their history was chewing at his gut. “I got the impression that they are not something you particularly like. You told me before that most are brands, but you implied that not all of them are.”

Hannibal let out a soft grunt and rubbed his thumb over one of the more intricate designs. “Some of them are mine. Most are not.”

Will frowned. He struggled with the question he wanted to ask. It seemed so terribly intrusive, but Hannibal *had* offered the information. He wanted Will to take it. “Which are which?”

Hannibal seemed far more braced for the topic than his counterpart. “In Persia, slaves are branded with ḵālkubi to mark who owns them. Whether they be a servant to a god or to a master. Each time a slave is passed on to a new owner, a new name or symbol to represent the servitude is tinted into their flesh.” He ran his fingertips over the less graceful of the designs.

Will recognized some as letters, similar to those he had seen in the book from Tarsus. Others were pictures or simple designs. He assumed them to be insignias of some kind. Many nobles in Rome possessed family insignias. It was not unusual. He wanted to reach out and touch the trail Hannibal’s hand left behind, but they were without seclusion and he wasn’t entirely certain the action would be welcome even if they had the entirety of the plains to themselves.

Hannibal continued when he saw that Will was at a loss for words. “Each one of these,” his fingers slowly ticked over the lines of words and symbols, one by one. “Marks one of my owners. I was born to a poor family, from what I’m told. I confess I do not remember them. They sold me into slavery when I was no higher than your knee. It was all I knew.”

Will swallowed harshly against the thickness of his throat. He had already known Hannibal had once been a slave, but their previous conversations had been brief and vague. To hear the story firsthand was unsettling. It was painful. He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Hannibal was absently rubbing the marks now, lost in memory. “Some masters were kinder than others. Some even allowed me a modicum of freedom. One, Ujarak was his name, taught me the way of the sword. He taught me battle and death. It was with his knowledge that I took my freedom from the very man who had taught me how to take it.”

Will blinked. “You killed Uj-Ujarak?” He struggled with the pronunciation, but Hannibal kindly took no notice.

“I did.” Hannibal seemed unashamed of the admission. In fact, he almost seemed fond. “He accepted his fate, in the end. Looked upon me as I held his own blade to his throat and told me not to waste the blood I spilled from him.”

“He wanted you to be free?”

“Perhaps. I think it’s more likely that my mutiny inspired respect. As you no doubt know, slaves do not often rebel. They accept their lot in life. They are defeated and tired. I understand that feeling and almost succumbed to it many times.” Hannibal took in a heavy breath and his hand stilled on his skin. “But I chose not to succumb, in the end. I think this impressed him and so he accepted his defeat with dignity. Later on, I found that admirable.”

“Later on?”

“At the time, I was young and angry. I had no understanding of death other than the death that had been law. I had been commanded to take lives and watched others take lives before me. I had never taken a life of my own volition.” A soft smile to Will and Hannibal was shaking his head. “I was not of the mind to understand his dignity in death. Such things are learned over time.”

Will’s hand twitched out and he almost reached for the man in front of him before catching himself. Self-consciously, he looked around to see if anyone had witnessed the innocuous gesture. “You said you don’t remember your family.” The words lilted at the end just enough to be inquisitive.

Hannibal was good enough not to acknowledge Will’s momentarily lapse of control. “I’ve attempted to recall them,” he replied. “On quiet nights I attempt to bring forward images of their faces, but I cannot even conjure the mist of them, let alone a detailed figure. They are entirely unknown to me. It’s as though they never existed at all.”

Will nodded and rubbed his own knees for a way to occupy his hands. “I never knew my mother.” He wasn’t certain if Hannibal would view the statement as detracting from his own tale, but he doubted Hannibal would have the capacity for such pettiness. It was the only way Will could relate to such a story. He had never been branded or claimed. He had no concept of the hardship of it. “She died giving birth to me.”

Hannibal, to his credit, seemed entirely undisturbed by Will’s addition to the conversation. “Your father raised you.”

“As well as he could.” Will stoked the fire. It had gone nearly to embers through the length of their conversation. “He was a farmer who liked himself a scholar.” He chuckled quietly. “He forced so many books upon me while he worked the fields that it was impossible not to love them. He didn’t give me a choice.”

“Then he was a wise man. It is my opinion that your love of such things is one of your finer qualities.”

A chuckle turned into an all-out laugh. “Is that so? That’s your opinion, is it?”

Will's mirth was matched by the glow in Hannibal's eyes. "It is. You have a perplexing depth to you, Will. I suspect your thirst for knowledge contributes greatly to that."

"I suppose," Will relented, laughter tapering off into something more tame. "Unfortunately, whatever plans he had for me were cut short by his death. I could not afford to keep the farm myself and a politician claimed the land from me and me along with it. He gave me a choice, stay in servitude to him or enlist in the legion."

"A politician of war, then?"

"I hated him enough to aggressively refuse to learn his identity." Will spoke the words bashfully. He knew, in hindsight, that the stubbornness he had employed to deny the man acknowledgment was not a benefit. "I believe he was involved in defense in some way. It's the only explanation for his enthusiasm at the option, but the option itself is not uncommon. I was not born a servant or slave and the nature of how my home was claimed allowed me the right to choose as a Roman citizen." A sting of guilt touched at his elbows meekly, reminding him that Hannibal had possessed no choice at all in his servitude. "It was a common choice back then for people of less means, like myself. The army or the broom, so to speak."

"I see."

Will sighed and looked up into the night sky. "I chose the military because there was an ending to it. After twenty years I can live my own life. If I had chosen the alternative, I'd have never been my own man."

"Better to risk death for freedom than never obtain freedom at all. It's a sentiment I share."

Will nodded, but as he moved to speak, the rustle of brush behind them cut him short. Surprised, he and Hannibal glanced back to see the cautious form of Tertius lingering at the edge of the shadows.

Tertius rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly and gave them a weak grin. "Hello."

Hannibal, eyebrows raised, regarded him with a collected curiosity. "Hello."

Will's jaw was slack as he stared between the two of them. With the exception of Caeso and significant circumstance, none of Will's friends had ever approached him when he was in Hannibal's company. If anything, they had made visible effort to avoid such contact. What was Tertius doing here?

Tertius rubbed his neck again and fixed Will with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry to intrude, but I was wondering if I could join you."

Will was about to spill out a myriad of excuses, but Hannibal's response came far too concisely to be argued.

"Of course. There is plenty of room and warmth from the fire." Hannibal gestured to the ground and quirked a brow at Will; a silent question for any objection.

Will shrugged and clutched at his knees, feeling ungrounded.

Tertius sat down, his every move precise and careful. He looked like a rabbit ready to dart away at the first sign of trouble.

Will felt a measure of guilt for making his friend so uncomfortable. He forced his shoulders to relax and smiled. “Sorry, Tertius. You’ve startled me, I must admit. Is everything alright?”

The smile seemed to inspire a glimmer of comfort in Tertius and he smiled back. “No, nothing is wrong. I know it’s all a bit forward, but I’ve grown rather tired of the lot of us avoiding…” He sucked in a breath and bit on his words, unable to choose the appropriate ones.

“Avoiding Will and I,” Hannibal supplied amicably. “Or, more succinctly, avoiding *me*.”

Tertius had the grace to look embarrassed. “Yes. Quite.”

“I hold no ill will towards any of you for the hesitance,” Hannibal said diplomatically. “I understand the caution.”

“Do you?” Tertius winced at his own words, but Hannibal seemed nonplussed.

“Of course. After all, my interaction with Will is not usual and the war hovering over our heads does not leave much room for trust of Persians. The climate is a terrible one indeed.” Hannibal gazed aimlessly in the direction of Antioch. “It is regretful, but not without reason. I would feel similar distrust in your stead.”

Will felt a wisp of affection pulling along his ribcage for the man next to him. “I haven’t spent enough time with you.” He was speaking to Tertius and he met his eyes as he did so. “I know that. Is that what drove you here?”

“Yes, in part,” Tertius replied, kicking out of his greaves to warm his feet by the fire. “Although I’m not nearly as sullen towards you for the slight as some are. I understand the excitement of new friendships. As long as you haven’t forgotten about us.” He winked.

Will laughed and shook his head. “Impossible. None of you would let me.”

“Damn true.”

“And who is sullen towards me?” Will wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer, but better to know now who he needed to make amends with than find out when tensions had run too high to repair.

Tertius grunted and cast a quick look back towards camp as though seeking out the guilty party. “Lucas is not particularly pleased. Then again, he’s never pleased, so not much to be done about that. I was expecting Caeso to be the most aggravated of anyone, but he has taken us by surprise in that regard.”

This revelation took Will aback. “I would have expected the same as you. It’s not the case?”

“After Augustus—“ Tertius paused and frowned uncomfortably. “After the incident at the cliffs, Caeso lectured Lucas like I’ve never seen. He told him to leave the business of you and

—“ He paused again and grimaced, looking hopefully in the auxilia captain’s direction.

Hannibal smirked and raised his hands to indicate he took no offense. “Hannibal.”

“Forgive me. I have not introduced myself either and I have no excuse for such behavior. I am Tertius.” Tertius bowed his head deeply and continued with his story after Hannibal returned the nod. “He told Lucas to leave the business of you and Hannibal be. I wouldn’t go as far as to call it a defense, but he was certainly far more accepting than I would have anticipated. He was resigned, in a way.”

Will thought back to the moment Caeso and Hannibal had shared after Augustus’ accident, each ruminating in the knowledge of sacrifice—leaders among men. “I think perhaps a level of respect was gained.”

Hannibal made a sound of agreement. “I suppose you could say that your legatus and I came to an understanding of one another in a certain capacity.”

Tertius grinned and it was all teeth and relief. “I’m very pleased to hear that, truly. It’s no secret that Will seems to enjoy his time with you. Though we have our own concerns, I can at least speak for myself when I say that I enjoy witnessing Will in such happiness.” As quickly as it had come, the relief fell from his face as though it had been struck from him. “But that does bring forward certain matters.”

Will was digging his fingers into the dirt and uprooting the grass. “You’re referring to the nature of my relationship with Hannibal.” He felt no need to mince words. Such tricks were unnecessary here.

Tertius swallowed, obviously disconcerted that they were speaking of the issue so brashly. “It is one thing to say nothing of Valerian and Jove, Will. They are Roman men. They have the respect of the century and have earned blind eyes.”

Will felt his jaw clench reflexively and bile rise in his throat. He forced it down. Tertius was not deserving of the anger swelling within him. “But even *friendship* with a Persian is something questioned. The nature of that friendship is more likely to be scrutinized. And what do you suggest?” His voice was harsher than he intended it to be, but the subject was a difficult one and it was making his hair stand on end.

Tertius sagged his shoulders and looked utterly despairing. “Will, you know I’ve no opinion either way of such things, but you know the way of the legion. You know what is at stake.”

Hannibal had withdrawn himself almost entirely from the conversation, watching as a silent observer on the sidelines. Perhaps he felt that his input would only exacerbate the situation.

Will spoke for both of them. “Nothing has happened,” he said finitely. “And if something ever were to occur, of whatever nature, I would hope you have enough knowledge of me to know I would not be so foolish about it. I am more private than any of you in these matters, Jove and Valerian included.”

Tertius looked pained. “I know, but nothing needs to happen, Will. Surely you see that. The men will create their own truths. They will decide the reality of you. The validity of that will be of no consequence. Our travels delay such judgement by benefit of exhaustion and preoccupation. Once we reach Antioch, the men will have time to stew in their gossip.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Will snapped.

Hannibal cleared his throat and the two Romans turned to him in question. “As much as I would prefer to say otherwise, I am in agreement with your friend, Will.”

Will gaped at him. “What?”

Hannibal smiled sadly and shook his head. “This friendship holds no negative consequence for me,” he said gently. “Not in the context that it does for you, certainly. I will not lose my station or my command. My laws are not Roman laws. It is entirely and unforgivably selfish of me to allow you to risk things that I myself am not required to put at stake.”

Will’s face was heating with anger. “You say this *now*? Of any man I’ve met, you’ve cared the least of such matters!” He had nearly forgotten Tertius entirely, his focus drawn forcefully to Hannibal. “A word from Tertius and you’ve decided against my worth?” He wanted to cry and he felt ridiculous for it.

Hannibal sighed. “Will.” His voice was a soft buffer for Will’s panic. “It is precisely the opposite. Your worth is greater than my desire for your companionship. As it should be. I had hoped in some idealistic way that the murmurs of the men would dim, but I have heard their mutterings just as you have. There are eyes turned upon us and Tertius is right. You stand to lose a great deal over nothing but rumor and speculation.”

“I don’t care!” Will groaned as soon as he said it, burying his head in his hands. He knew he was acting like a child. “Let them talk. They have proof of nothing because there is nothing to prove.”

“And whose word will you have defend yours?” Tertius spoke up. “Caeso?”

“I cannot ask that of him,” Will grumbled into his palms.

“You will not need to.” Tertius cut his hand through the air. “Without a thought, he will come to your aid should the need arise. My concern is that the need *will* arise.” He stopped, briefly, to take his words with care. Sighing when he realized there was no gentle way to continue, he nodded in Hannibal’s direction. “He is a Persian, Will. The Persians encroach. Our men will not tell friend from foe when tensions reach their peak. Both you and Hannibal will be in danger of the backlash.”

A darkness was clinging to the insides of Will’s chest; a fear, a rage, a helplessness. It swallowed up his organs and turned it all into a pit and for a moment he let it consume him. He allowed the darkness to sweep over him for a whisper of time, drinking of it like bitter wine. His eyes closed and he embraced the concept of Ouroboros—consuming himself.

Then, there was a spark of dawning comprehension flickering to life in his mind. Once more, he was beginning to understand himself; slowly and in inconsequential pieces that were adding up to threads in a tapestry. The image was revealing itself over time and Will let the dark claws of panic reveal another piece. He took a deep breath and it was gone, replaced by resolve and determination—the bits of which had been building along his psyche for weeks now. At facing the prospect of forgoing his friendship with Hannibal, he found himself discovering the depths of his own wants. It was solidifying.

Will had given up many pleasures in life in favor of keeping at level sea. He did not enjoy the ruckus of waves. Too often sickness overtook him in those moments. As he sat there before the fire, faced with the prospect of forgoing yet another dignity, he was surprised with how willing he was to allow waves to shake his foundation. What sickness may come, he would endure it.

Hannibal began to speak, but Will cut him off. “I will not speak for Hannibal, but I can damn well speak for myself.” He viciously rubbed the tears brimming at his eyes and sat firm, eyes narrowed. “I am a good soldier and a better medic. I am a loyal Roman. I have served the capital well and I will continue to do so. Should anyone question this, I will gut them myself.”

Tertius regarded the exclamation with wide eyes and parted lips. He looked unmoored and impressed. Will had rarely spoken this way in all the time they had known one another.

“I don’t believe gutting anyone will be necessary,” Hannibal interjected. His voice was firm, but there was a touch of amusement lingering beneath the surface.

Will didn’t allow Hannibal’s pleasure to dull his steel. He needed both Tertius and Hannibal to understand. He needed to them to know where he stood. “There are precious few good things in this life. I’ve never had much and I’ve never asked for much. I’m asking for this, Tertius.”

Tertius was staring into his eyes, long and seeking. “Why?”

Will shrugged. “Does it matter? For whatever reason, I am happy. With Hannibal, I’m…” He trailed off and spared a look in Hannibal’s direction. The older man was regarding him with dark eyes and an unreadable expression. Will turned back to Tertius. “I’ve discovered that being near Hannibal makes me a better version of myself. I understand myself more than I have since I was a boy. His friendship gives me that, intentional or otherwise. I do not wish to sacrifice that, regardless of rumor. Come what may, Tertius. I will handle this battle willingly, if I must.”

“I must admit I was not expecting such fervor,” Tertius said slowly, licking his lips and looking into the fire. “But I am glad I found it. I won’t pretend to understand the connection between the two of you, but I am no stranger to connection.” His fingers trailed idly over his shield, named for a woman he had long since left behind. “Far be it from me to judge the worth of yours.” When Will and Hannibal said nothing, he grabbed his greaves and stood. “I will intrude upon you no longer, but know this.” He turned to Will. “If this is what you truly want, you know that we will stand behind you until the bitter end, just as you have done for all of us time and time again. You have been the best kind of friend to every single one of us.

We would be fools not to return the favor." As he made to leave, he bent at the knee and clapped a firm hand over Hannibal's shoulder, nodding to him resolutely. "And to you, as an extension of him, our offer will also extend. I will ensure it."

Tertius left quickly and only as the night grew silent once more did Will realize how violently his heart was pounding. It was slamming like a mason's hammer to his breastbone and he put a hand to his chest as though to hold it in. When he realized Hannibal still wasn't speaking, he frowned. "Have I failed to say what you wished of me?"

"Never."

Will slowly moved his eyes to Hannibal's and was met with the ebony of coal. The intensity of the gaze was unavoidable and seeped into his skin like oil. "You scared me," he admitted.

This time, it was Hannibal's hand that made the aborted twitch; wanting to touch and knowing he couldn't. "Did you think I would want nothing to do with you? I merely speculated that we should be more cautious."

Will drew his knees to his chest. "You wouldn't have simply ended it all to avoid the possible consequence?"

"Had I wished to have done so, this never would have begun. Consequence was a given." Hannibal did not smile. His face was still and unyielding. "Regardless, I believe I haven't the strength of character to make that choice."

"I'd argue otherwise."

"You would be wrong."

"Are you saying you refuse to be separated from me? It's been mere weeks. Surely we would survive." Will swallowed and his tongue was thick and tacky.

Hannibal's expression softened minutely with a tilt of his head. A few dark strands of hair fell against his forehead. "I am saying that with mere weeks, I have glimpsed what *years* would yield. It is in that prediction that I cannot stand idly by."

"Good." Will dug his heels into the dirt. "Then I'm not the only one."

An exhale that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "You have never been alone in that regard, Will."

The fire snapped loudly as a twig broke in the flames.

Will grimaced. "And what if we reach Antioch and there is confrontation?"

"Then we will be confronted."

Will rolled his eyes. "Brilliant."

This time the noise was most definitely a laugh. "Surely we can handle childish provocation."

“You can,” Will retorted, scowling. “I’m not nearly as intimidating as you are.”

“You will be if the need arises.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I have always been sure of you, Will.”

As always, Will let Hannibal have the last word.

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The following days were a blur. The mornings were a rush of disassembling camp and counting over supplies. The afternoons were a haze of Will and Orion checking the soldiers for injury and deprivation, neither willing to speak to the other over Augustus. At night, Hannibal and Will had resumed their reading, switching casually between languages as Will attempted to learn Hannibal’s mother tongue as best he could with his oversaturated mind. Their bodies were tired and weak from the journey and they had both agreed to postpone Will’s training until they had found time to rest in Antioch.

Today was that day. Will had been able to see the city walls for two hours now. The coast held no secrets, allowing the visage of the city of Antioch to spring out high and powerful over the waves. The soldiers were hardly speaking now, each taking in the majesty of it within themselves. It had been months since any of them had seen a place that could in any way claim to be a city. The sight was a welcome and exciting one.

It was a sight that spoke of rest, of food, of beds rather than tents.

The thrill was rushing through them like wildfire, reinvigorating their steps and pushing thoughts of exhaustion and pain out to be swallowed whole in the depths of the ocean waters. They would be upon the gates in thirty minutes, perhaps less, and their journey would finally be at an end.

Will breathed in the now familiar scent of salt and savored it like it was the first smell of a clean day. His feet ached with the desire to step upon cobbled streets once more. His muscles warmed at the thought of feathers beneath his back and his mouth sweetened as he imagined wine that was not dull from water and musk.

He was no fool. They were soldiers and would by no means be welcomed with noble accommodations, but to a man who had been on the road for many months on end, even the simplest of amenities were akin to royal privilege.

Will’s contemplations were cut short by a heavy arm thundering down over his shoulders. He grunted under the weight and Cimon laughed down at him.

“All good things must come to an end!” Cimon crowed. He looked jubilant. “Finally we can kick our feet up and be rid of this wretched dirt and stone.”

“You speak as though we’ve taken some kind of vacation,” Will chided, but Cimon’s joy was seeping into his own and he laughed in spite of himself. “This is no time for rest.”

Cimon let a belligerent sound escape his lips and he shook his head. “Command will no doubt allow us a moment to breathe, dear Will. Months, it’s been. They know better than to send an army of deflated men into battle.”

“And Caeso will be far too busy being chastised by said command for our tardiness,” Will muttered dourly. It seemed unfair that they celebrate while Caeso would be having his ear ravaged with complaints until all their ears would be burning in sympathy.

“Caeso’s always been good at handling the finger wagging,” Cimon replied with a shrug. “They will slap his wrists and send him to some unpleasant task and all will return to normal. As a legatus, he is well valued. There is no need for you to concern yourself.”

Will pressed his lips together and let the lumbering of his companion yank him to and fro in their walk. Cimon seemed content to hold onto him like a doll and tug him about. It was easy to do, seeing as Will was hardly half the size of the other man. Will allowed it, more amused than hindered. “I suppose you’re right. I won’t deny that I’m just as eager as you to come to a stop. Even if it must be brief.”

“Brief!” Cimon clapped his hand to his forehead as though the mere word caused him pain. “Please, Will, do not temper it with such words. Allow me the pleasure of believing I can take my fill of wine and women and a real bed without the looming prospect of more *walking*.”

Will laughed. “Fine, then we shall stay forever and it will all be never ending and grand.”

Cimon made a mimicry of looking affronted. “Your mockery is so cold, Will.”

“I do my best.”

They both grinned to themselves and continued walking towards the gates; looming ever closer and welcoming them into the safe and walled depths of Antioch. Eventually, Cimon let his arm fall away, giving Will free reign of his own gait once more.

“And what do you plan, Will?” Cimon asked casually. “Regardless of purpose, we no doubt have days before we are called upon to act. You must have thirsts you need quenched.” He glanced conspiratorially towards the auxilia as he said this, elbowing the shorter legionary roguishly.

Will returned the elbow with much more force, for whatever good it did to elbow a mountain. “My thirsts will be handled accordingly, thank you.” His look urged Cimon not to press the matter, but the blush creeping up his cheeks did him no favors.

Cimon’s smile turned gentle and he leaned down to whisper. “Will, for what it’s worth, I think you should drink your fill of whatever wine you desire. You have earned that enjoyment.”

Will appreciated the metaphor and the reassurance both and made sure Cimon could see the gratefulness in his eyes. “Thank you, truly. I don’t know what I plan. Things have not

precisely been written out in steps. For the first time, I'm allowing myself to simply be led by circumstance."

"I respect a man's ability to let fate drag him down the current, as long as he ensures he is a good swimmer before taking the dive." Cimon snapped his fingers and adjusted the pilum on his back. "I'll be around the corner, either way, should you need someone to drag you back up for air."

"I know you will be." This time Will squeezed the arm of the man beside him rather than jamming his elbow into it. "Tertius said much the same a few nights past."

"He told me and the others," Cimon admitted. He didn't speak it as a secret and so Will didn't take it as a reason for concern. "Though Valerian is nervous, Lucas is grumpy, and Caeso is overprotective, we've all agreed that your current endeavors have seemed to benefit you."

Will snorted. "I do wish you'd all stop having these conversations without me."

Cimon gave him a pointed look. "And how would we manage that? Every night found you away from Roman campfires."

Will blanched and ducked his head in embarrassment. "You've got me pinned to the wall on that one, I'm afraid. Now that our travels have ceased, I'll be able to spread my time more wisely."

"I should hope so." Cimon looked up as they approached the gate and the officers shouted to the city guard. "I expect you to get unforgivably drunk with Lucas and I at least twice before I can entirely forgive you for the slight."

"I'm sure I can manage something." Will followed the gaze to the wall as the century came to a stop, the auxilia hovering off by the embankment. He swept a quick glance back through them and saw Hannibal amidst a group of his men, listing off orders to each of them; no doubt on how to handle being in a Roman city so near the Mesopotamian borders of Persia on the brink of war.

Will felt his chest twist in burden. There was no way of knowing how welcome the auxilia would be in Antioch. Though they were an extension of the legion by way of coin, the distrust of the soldiers was nothing compared to the common folk. The soldiers of the century knew, at the very least, that the auxilia was useful in battle and drew their swords when it counted. Their words of racism and judgment were restricted mostly to words out of respect for this known usefulness. The general public, however, would not see it similarly. To the men and women of Antioch, Hannibal and his men were Persians and that was the extent of their identity.

Will's worry only began to double over on itself as he saw Caeso stalk regally through the thick of the militia and straight to Hannibal. They were too far away for Will to make out any words, but there was no doubt in his mind as to what the topic of discussion pertained to.

In all likelihood, Caeso was informing Hannibal of the appointments Antioch was allowing his men. He was detailing the location of their shelter and the rights that were being allowed the militia by whatever decree the city guard had made, as was his duty as legatus to disclose. It was standard conduct when entering a larger city for any extended period of time, where the auxilia would not be able to camp outside the limits of the public.

Will frowned in confusion when he saw Hannibal smile appreciatively and clasp hands with Caeso in a shocking expression of comradery. Caeso returned the grasp with both hands and nodded, saying something muted by distance and waves. Will was shaken out of his stupor by Cimon's hand just as Caeso was taking his leave from the auxilia and he was forced to turn back around. Whatever that exchange had been, he would have to ask one or both of the men about it later.

"Come on, then," Cimon urged, propelling Will forward as the gates creaked open. "Let's get that drink."

Will laughed and tried to shake the hand off to no avail. "Can't we at least eat something first?"

"And let the rest of the men drink all the good wine?" Cimon pressed a hand to his breastplate. "I'd rather die."

Chapter End Notes

We're almost at 60k words already. That's crazy! We still have a long way to go. I shudder to think how long this story will turn out to be. Printed off in a book you could easily beat someone to death with the weight of it. ....not that you'd do that.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> “There are fewer decent men in the world than you realize.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The markets of Antioch were of a different kind. Cimon had attempted lamely to pull Will away from the avenues of silk and spice, but it was to no avail. Will was caught up in wonderment as his fingertips glazed over the sheens of silk that glimmered in the afternoon sun. A trader shuffled over to him with a wide grin and wider arms and held up the cloth that Will had been inspecting. The green of it was rich and made Will think of forests.

“A modest sum and you could present such a gift!” the trader crooned. He was missing three teeth and smiled as though he could not be prouder of the gaps.

Cimon quirked an unimpressed brow. “And how modest would that be?”

When the man responded, Cimon barked out a laugh and hauled Will away, muttering curses about thieves and scoundrels. “I’d need to sell my soul for such a fee!”

Will laughed and allowed himself to be tugged along. “Silk is even more a rarity now than before.”

Cimon snorted. “Trust battles in the East to cause trial with clothing.”

Will simply shook his head and continued to peruse the wares that surrounded them, tossing the silk trader an apologetic look over his shoulder. “We’re lucky not to be at war amongst ourselves. We should not speak ill.”

“We aren’t today, but there’s always tomorrow,” Cimon teased. “Romans do have a tendency towards boredom.”

Will hummed and paused at a spice rack, much to his companion’s dismay. He couldn’t imagine what it must be like to have the whole of the empire divided amongst itself in such a way as the Easterners now found themselves. Since the end of the Han dynasty nine years prior, whispers of multiple factions striving to stake claim as rightful emperor had led to bloody battles amongst the people. Even the soldiers flinched at the tales traders brought along the silk road with them—with sunken eyes that had seen far too much of death and burning villages.

The result on Roman fronts had been the drastic rise in the demand for silk and an increase in diplomatic relations with the Indians and their spices; those who sought to fill the gap China had left behind during its own personal catastrophe of self. Now spices were plentiful and silk was clutched desperately by the thread.

Will chuckled as he recalled a scholar from his younger days who had purged all silk from the confines of his appointments, rambling on about the immorality of cloth that served no better success in covering the skin of decent folk than the deplorable exception of nudity itself. He had been a prudent man and the youth under his study had laughed at the passion of his disapproval.

With a deep breath, Will reveled in the sharp aromas of cinnamon and bright orange glow of turmeric that seemed to filter into the very air. Contrary to first impressions, the gates themselves had not welcomed them straight into the heart of Antioch. The soldiers had found themselves with a distance yet, rocky beaches turning into lush trees and plains that rose into hills and tapered off into the Orontes river. The city itself was a large one—by no means in comparison to Rome or Alexandria, but in its own right, nonetheless—and the startling and sheer size of it had taken Will aback for a grounding moment. So accustomed he had grown to empty roads and farmlands. Even the academies and granaries of Tarsus could not compare to the feeling that overwhelmed when surrounded entirely by people and commerce and carved stone. Will felt swallowed whole by the city itself and it gave him the impression that he could melt away into anonymity if he so desired. With just a blink, he would be merely one more face in the crowd; no greater or lesser than any other man.

It was a tempting thought, but the constant pull of Cimon at his arm lured him away from such considerations.

“And the Capitolia? Can we visit it?” Will murmured more to himself than to his friend, still focused on inspecting a bottle of powder from yet another rack. He looked at the owner of the spice. “What is this?”

Cimon’s voice drowned out the shopkeep’s response. “Octavian’s ode to Jupiter Capitolinus?” He rolled his eyes. “Take Valerian with you there, Will. I’d rather my time spent deep in women than in temples.”

Will grudgingly set the flask down and shrugged. “Valerian would enjoy it, I think.”

“Much more inclined to take to your scholarly fancies.”

“They aren’t fancies.”

Cimon laughed and shook Will’s shoulder in apology. “To me, perhaps. Simply because I cannot appreciate the marvel you see in it due to my own limitations.”

Will couldn’t quite keep the smile from pulling onto his face. “So complimentary, you are. An effort to save yourself?”

“Whatever from?” Cimon winked. “Surely you are not prone to taking offense at such small details as the word “fancy”, Will.”

Will shoved at him, uselessly, and picked up his pace towards the smells of food. He had made Cimon suffer long enough. “To the wine, then.”

“To the wine!” Cimon cheered.

And, as though summoned by the mere mention of spirits, Lucas appeared from the crowd as a shadow. “We’re drinking, then?” He looked as sullen and stern as ever and Will jumped a foot at the sight of him, crying out. Lucas stared. “Oh, calm yourself. Honestly.”

“You can’t simply sneak up on someone and demand calm,” Will grumbled, blushing and rubbing at his arms. He had just spooked like a newborn foal in the middle of the market. He wondered if anyone would notice if he crawled underneath the nearby sacks of cloth and hid there until nightfall. “Announce yourself or something.” He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes.

Lucas stared at Will like he’d grown another head and the head had started singing children’s lullabies. “I did no sneaking. There’s a positive *legion* of people in this square! How could I possibly sneak? Wear a silk cloth over my head and pretend to be a camel?”

Cimon was guffawing off to the side, clapping his hands as though the exchange were the best display he had ever witnessed. “Oh, but Will, your face was pure terror!”

“I don’t see how that’s funny,” Will sniffed. “Lucas’ face is a terror.”

“There’s no denying that.”

Lucas scowled and punched them both on the arms. Will hissed and stepped back. Cimon looked entirely unaffected and so Lucas hit him again. “Both of you can stuff—“

“Pardon.”

The three of them cut their horseplay short in the murmur of the crowd, turning to look upon the new arrival and expecting a stranger complaining of ruckus. To Will’s surprise, he knew the man.

“Bahadur, isn’t it?” he asked, frowning in confusion. It was the man from the auxilia who had helped when one of their legionaries had fallen to thirst all those days ago.

Bahadur looked terribly out of place in the middle of the square. If the tense set of his jaw and vigilant awareness of his surroundings was anything to go by, he was well aware how conspicuous he truly was. There were people of all colors and creeds filtering through the marketplace, but only now did Will realize the distinct absence of Persians. It seemed Bahadur had noticed this quite a bit sooner than Will had and he reluctantly stepped closer to the soldiers and away from the prying ears of the city folk. “We’re intruding.” He said it by way of an apology and looked around again.

“We…?” Will trailed off and peered over the other man’s shoulder. Sure enough, three other men from the auxilia were hovering back by a cart near the walls, looking twice as rigid as Bahadur. The weight of their unease was palpable and Will felt his chest ache with it. “Is something the matter?”

Lucas shifted on his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, but said nothing. He was respecting Will's role here. Beyond all of them, now, Will had the most experience and knowledge of their Persian allies. It was almost overwhelming, allowing such judgement to be deferred to him as though he was an expert on the matter.

Bahadur rubbed the back of his neck and looked at his comrades with a small grimace; barely more than a twitch of eyes and chin. "There's some displeasure at our current position," he admitted. "Some of us more than others are finding that we are…" He took in a breath and met Will's eyes. "Concerned for our safety at present."

Will's frown deepened. "Have you been threatened?"

A tight shake in the negative and Bahadur's head was once more turned to his men. "Not in so obvious a way, as of yet. But I felt that perhaps if our allegiances were more overtly displayed—"

"You wish to use us as a shield," Lucas interrupted. He swiped his thumb at his nose and crossed his arms again. "As a display so your associations will not be questioned."

Bahadur frowned at the rudeness but allowed the topic to hang in abeyance for a moment. After all, his intention was clear.

Will swallowed back a reprimand that threatened to spill over towards Lucas. He understood the aggravation and combating it would serve no purpose. Instead, he turned his focus to Bahadur and his men. "Why have you come to me? Surely you could seek out our officers for something more substantial."

Bahadur raised a quizzical brow. "You wonder at my choice? I know of *you*, Will. I do not know of your officers."

Lucas bristled at the use of Will's name like it was a curse, but he held his tongue and Will was grateful for it.

A sigh. Will didn't enjoy the fact that his fellows were allowing him to make the call here. It was putting a weight on his shoulders that was unsettling. Will was no leader. He chewed his lip. "Your men seem discomfited by the idea of seeking the aid of Romans."

Bahadur shut his eyes. It was no lie. The men from the militia looked braced for combat rather than conversation. "They are far more discomfited by the thought of being thrown from Antioch by a rabble than by spending the afternoon with men of the legion, I assure you."

Will glanced at Cimon, who shrugged unhelpfully. Will chewed his lip again. He really needed to break himself of the habit one day. "If everyone is in agreement, I have no argument," he said finally. "I would not wish harm upon you. If our presence helps you in some way, I would not deny you that."

A visible tension bled from Bahadur's shoulder and he bowed gratefully. "I know that it isn't customary, but considering circumstances, perhaps striking out from custom is…"

“Understandable,” Cimon offered magnanimously. He was sending Bahadur a sympathetic look and Will felt a great deal of appreciation towards him then. Cimon smiled at Will. “We were on our way to drink. Join us. Another will be joining us shortly and perhaps we can make use of his more expert political wisdom to find a solution for your problem.”

Bahadur bowed again, seemingly at a loss for words. Perhaps he hadn’t expected them to say yes. He waved to his men and they ambled forward, unsure and untrusting but determined to follow wherever Bahadur would lead them.

“Are you a commander of some kind?” Will asked. “I couldn’t help but notice you possess authority.”

Bahadur titled his head curiously at the question. “Not in the same way as your officers, no, but my presence carries more weight than some. I work closely with the captain on tactics. I have known him for many years.”

Will chewed on his lip as they began walking down the street, the lot of them making efforts to ignore the occasional stares shot their way. Now that they had Persians in their company, Will found himself abnormally attuned to the attention being paid to them by passersby. He wasn’t entirely certain if it was paranoia rearing its ugly head or if the stares were truly as displeased as they appeared. He didn’t care to find out.

He glanced sideways at Bahadur. The temptation to hound the man with endless questions about Hannibal was gnawing at him like a rabid dog. The only impression of Hannibal he could hope to gain was from his own perception and experience. He knew no one else who had more than a passing knowledge of the enigmatic captain, but here he was walking with a soldier who had known Hannibal for years. The things he could learn; it was almost irresistible.

Will, ever obvious when he was far too lost in his own thoughts, gave a start when Bahadur called him out on it.

“I’ve seen that you spend a great deal of time with our captain.” The Persian’s words were unassuming and lacking entirely of judgment, but the acknowledgment of Will’s thoughts was apparent. “It is a unique friendship, to be sure.”

Lucas snorted from the side and Will ignored him. “Yes. He and I are friends.”

Bahadur looked at him then, eyebrow raised, but he made no move to correct Will’s choice of words, likely aware of the controversy of the topic. “Yes,” he said slowly. “But I know him well enough to know that he can be a cryptic man at times.”

Will laughed outright before he could stop himself. “Beautifully understated.”

Bahadur’s responding smile was much more reserved.

The conversation came to a restful halt as they continued down the road. Will didn’t press it. It wasn’t the time or place to urge along such discourse. Privacy was in short supply and the

situation was tense enough with the vigilant militia soldiers hovering back and Lucas grumbling discontentedly to the side.

Soon enough, they found their way to a tavern that presented with an intricately carved arch of wood to shield the doorway and a potent smell of food and smoke that fanned out every time someone crossed the threshold. They awkwardly squeezed their way into the back corner of the tavern, cautious of the lingering looks of the patrons, and Will grimaced as he watched everyone battle with their choice of seating.

It wasn't until Lucas had gotten up and moved twice and one of the auxilia soldiers had outright refused to sit down that Cimon had become fed up with the debacle and slammed a fist on the table.

"Enough of this!" he announced. He gave each and every man a hard look in turn. "We are allies and we have all spilled blood together on the same fields. Sit down and drink with one another like adults."

Will put his hand to his mouth to cover his grin as the men did what they were told and silently sat down in their chairs, hands in laps and eyes trained on the grainy wood of the table. They looked like a bunch of chastised children in a schoolhouse.

Pleased with the obedience, Cimon waved over a barmaid and requested a round for the lot of them. "Now that we've all decided to stop dancing around the table like fools," Cimon said, pursing his lips when the others shuffled and looked antagonized. "Let us forgo petty opinions and enjoy the fact that we have found *rest*. We are not walking, boys. This is reason for celebration."

There was an uncomfortable lull in which they all exchanged glances between one another, daring each other to speak first. Surprisingly, it was one of the auxilia soldiers that broke the silence.

"We walked a lot." It was all he said and yet it broke the tension like the cut of a sword.

There was a collective sigh of relief around the table and they all settled more comfortably in their seats.

Cimon chuckled. "That we did." He said his thanks as the barmaid returned with their drinks and took a swig of his own. "That we did."

Lucas cleared his throat and all eyes turned to him. He frowned under the scrutiny but held fast. "I'd assume you were used to such treks. A great deal of Persia is desert."

Will's lips parted in shock of their own accord. Of anyone he knew, Lucas would have been the last person he would have expected to attempt conversation. He felt guilty for his assumption. Perhaps he didn't know his friends as well as he thought.

The soldier who had spoken prior blinked into his cup. "I've lived in Rome since I was a child. I don't know much of the homeland." His fingers were running idly over the clay in his hands. "But my brother," he nodded to the silent soldier on his right. "He lived in Persia until

a few years ago. He is the reason I am in the auxilia. My parents passed and he returned from Persia to take me in. He is a warrior, so I too became one."

"Are you a Roman citizen?" Lucas seemed genuinely intrigued now. Will didn't blame him. The assumption had been that the entirety of the auxilia were Persian born and bred.

Will felt his heart sink. This poor boy. He had spent almost his entire life in Rome and yet regardless he was being spurned by its citizens for a heritage he had barely even seen with his own eyes. It was unflinchingly cruel and unfair.

The man shook his head. "No. My parents were stubborn. They never sought the papers. They used to say that we should never abandon who we are completely."

"Odd to live in Rome, then, if they were so overly concerned," Lucas grunted.

"I said as much to them on more than one occasion."

Lucas stared at the older brother discerningly. "And him?"

"He doesn't speak much of your tongue. He is learning." At that, the man turned to say something to his brother in Persian. His brother immediately shook his head and continued to focus on his glass. The younger of the two sighed and looked back at Lucas. "The transition hasn't been easy on him."

"I can't imagine it has been," Will said quietly. "Leaving one's home is a trial, no matter the home."

"You are Will, yes?" The soldier eyed him inquisitively as though seeking something that would explain a great mystery. "The friend of the captain and Bahadur?"

Will wanted to say that he and Bahadur didn't know each other well enough to be friends, but Bahadur shrugged in the corner of his eye and so he simply nodded. "Yes. And your name?"

"Firuz. And my brother is Jalil."

Jalil scowled at the use of his name and poured himself more fervently into his liquor. He reminded Will of Lucas so distinctly that Will was momentarily thrown. He shook himself from his thoughts in favor of politeness and motioned towards his own companions. "This is Cimon and Lucas."

A few cursory nods of introduction were exchanged and the men settled into a slightly more complacent attitude. For a while, all they did was drink and speak quietly about inconsequential matters—the price of goods in the bazaar, the cool of the weather coming down from the mountains, whether or not anyone had been to Antioch before.

Will had never been fond of small-talk. It set his teeth on edge and made his mind stagnant and boiling. Favoring compulsion over propriety, he turned to Bahadur. "I saw our legatus speaking with Hannibal at the gates. Were they discussing your appointments?"

Bahadur looked taken aback. "I had assumed you knew."

Will's eyes narrowed. "Knew what?"

"Your legatus secured us residence. The city guard was refusing us entry and your legatus persuaded them otherwise." Bahadur looked disgusted as he spoke, lip curling. "Despite the city guard's best efforts, it was your legatus' influence that allowed us passage into this place. We are grateful to him."

Will felt a sick lurch in his gut and he set his cup down. Understanding was creeping along his skin like a cockroach. "And this is why you felt discomfort on your own. The guard would not interfere if…" He breathed in, slow and shaky. "If there were to be confrontation, the guard would make no effort to intervene."

"It is unlikely they would assist us," Bahadur replied casually. It seemed he had accepted his fate as gracefully as any pariah could. "And should any of us attempt to come to our own defense, we would likely be thrown from the city. Your legatus' word only carries so much weight."

Will rubbed his eyes and turned to his friends. Cimon looked tense and irritated and Lucas was pointedly looking away from everyone, but Will could tell he was just as displeased as the rest of them. Will leaned back in his chair. "It's not right."

"Right or wrong is not important in times of war," Bahadur responded coolly. "All that matters is majority rule. Right now, the majority rules us as defilers of peace. Our allegiance goes as far as our skin and no further."

Cimon sniffed and downed the rest of his wine. "Without an overt display of your employ with the century, you stand no chance of dampening the impression. Hence, you find yourself at this table."

Bahadur nodded.

"Why, then, did you bring no others with you?" Will questioned. He was toying with the string of one of his bracers for need of something to do. "Surely there were others who see the value of this attempt."

"Those who did not outright reject the concept believed wholly that you would refuse us."

Will felt needlessly hurt by the information. He had spent so much time in the auxilia's camp. No, he hadn't truly interacted with anyone besides Hannibal, but his companionship with their captain should have been display enough of his opinion. He shook his head as soon as the thought had crossed his mind. That was ridiculous. His relationship with Hannibal had no impact on the others. All they knew of him was his face and nothing more. One cannot trust a face when there is nothing more to go along with it.

The men of the militia were afraid and they had every right to be. Trapped in a city that did not want them there and hovering near the borders of their former home, they had to be smothered with doubts and concerns that far outweighed Will's petulant need to be seen as accepting.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I’ll make no claims to understand the difficulty of this.”

Bahadur lifted a solemn palm and shook his head. “It is the way of things. It is the captain’s hope that focuses will shift from us in time. We are simply something new and unknown and it draws attention. Attention fades swiftly in mobs.”

“The guard would allow much. I make no argument there,” Lucas interjected, knocking his cup on the table. “But mobs? Surely this would be halted posthaste. They cannot allow rioting in the streets.”

“They wouldn’t,” Cimon agreed. He looked as grim as he had ever been. “But if rioting occurs, the auxilia will surely be thrown out on their asses to ease the tension. Caeso will have no manner of clout strong enough to contest.”

Lucas snorted. “Foolish.” But he said nothing more, already vexed by his own unexpected sympathy.

“You said Valerian would join us shortly.” Will turned to Cimon, seeking solutions for a situation that felt niggling on the edge of impossibility. “He was stationed as city guard for a time a few years back, was he not?”

Cimon nodded. “My thoughts went there as well. Of any of us, he would have wisdom.”

Will frowned into his wine. He was beginning to feel increasingly useless as the moments passed. Hannibal and his men were not safe here. The danger was at the whim of the public and the public’s whim was as capricious as any wild beast. Will was a Roman. As such, he should have some manner of impact, but his presence was as useful as a sack of potatoes. He could do nothing. He was no politician. He was no leader. All he could do was sit back and watch this struggle and pray to whatever god listening that nothing would come of this chaos.

He thumbed the edge of his cup and sighed. He had spoken to Hannibal the night prior, but it felt like a lifetime ago. The last stretch of the trek to Antioch has been dreary and monotonous and the short time they had spent in the city was quickly becoming overwhelming. Will felt a sudden exhaustion overtake him then and slumped in his chair. He was aware somewhere in the back of his senses that someone was speaking to him, but it took him a moment to focus.

“What?”

Bahadur was looking at him quizzically. “You went far away.”

Will blushed. “Yes, I suppose I did. Did you say something to me?” He glanced aside and noticed the rest of the men were engaged in tame conversation, sharing wine and peace and it made Will’s heart warm.

“I asked if you wanted to talk about Hannibal,” Bahadur repeated for what may very well have been the third time.

Will’s eyes widened and he looked back. “Why would I—“

Bahadur pierced him with a severe look and Will's mouth snapped shut. "Because, as I said, I know him. And you seem interested to know what I know. Forgive my rudeness, but only a blind man would not see that."

Will smiled bashfully. "Okay. Yes, but it felt inappropriate to ask."

"Well, now I am offering."

Brows furrowed, Will rubbed his palms together uncomfortably. "And the nature of he and I? It does not concern you?" He said this lowly, leaning toward the man next to him in a manner he hoped would not come off as conspiratory.

Bahadur laughed. "You Romans and your ideals. No, it does not concern me. There are far more concerning things in the world than that."

Will relaxed. Despite how many times Hannibal had explained the differences in their cultures, Will had difficulty shaking the expectation that everyone would look poorly upon their relationship, no matter their origin. "I am unused to such indifference, I suppose."

"It makes sense. I have been here long enough to witness the judgment that can be so easily cast."

"Not everyone casts it."

"But many."

A sigh. "Yes. Many."

Bahadur shrugged as though he was letting the weight of discrimination fall from his shoulders. "I confess I find myself pleased that Hannibal has found someone to keep his attention for so long." He was keeping his voice equally low, likely out of respect to Will's fear of drawing attention to it. "Flighty he is not, but the same could be said for him allowing trust."

Will couldn't help the surge of excitement he felt flicking his breastbone. This was his chance to ask questions about Hannibal that would not come from the man himself. He could see Hannibal from another perspective; a perspective far more knowledgeable than that of his own. He tried to keep the enthusiasm from his face for sake of propriety, but it was difficult. "He doesn't trust often? I'm not entirely certain he trusts me."

"He does not, and he does trust you," Bahadur replied confidently. "He would not spend such time with you if he did not. He is a wary and cautious man and with good reason. Men like he and I have seen much of the world. We know the darkness that can overtake it. For him to allow you so near and with such an expression as he wears in your company," the Persian leaned forward on his elbows, smiling gently. "It is gratifying to see from him. It is a hard earned pleasantness that has been sorely lacking."

"He wears a particular expression with me?" Will knew the question sounded vaguely narcissistic in its inquiry, but he pushed the embarrassment aside in favor of his desire to

know everything he could.

“He does. He looks positively enthralled. Have you not noticed?”

The weight of the word hit Will head on and he felt dizzy. “I noticed it to an extent, but I feel enthralled is far too generous a word.”

“It is accurate.”

Will swallowed and stared at his hands, not knowing what to say.

Bahadur didn’t press him, instead continuing along the train of thought. “He is a man of violence, as most aged men of war tend to be. We are angry, then violent, then tired. I feared that Hannibal would venture into exhaustion with nothing in between. I have hope that you will break the monotonous cycle that is such a life.”

“You know but pieces of me,” Will muttered. “How can you possibly have such faith in my goodness?”

“It is Hannibal’s judgment that I trust.” Bahadur nodded gratefully to the woman who refilled his wine. She ducked away anxiously and he ignored the slight. “And nothing in your actions has proven contrary. I am sitting at this table now out of your kindness, am I not?”

“No decent man would allow you to face undeserved threats if he could stop it,” Will countered. “Or at the very least postpone.”

The smile on Bahadur’s face was a sullen thing. “There are fewer decent men in the world than you realize.”

Sensing the conversation was veering off course, Will hastily tried to bring it back around. “You speak of Hannibal so fondly. Not as comrades in arms but as friends. Even family.” He grimaced. “I hope the observation is not forward.”

Bahadur did not appear to be abashed. “I would say that was a fair statement. I have known him nearly all of my time in Rome. He took me into his care, in a way, and it is because of him twenty times over that I am still alive today. He is a man that I respect above all others and I believe I can say with conviction that he likewise considers me a friend.”

Will smiled and felt unexplainably glad. It wasn’t that he had expected Hannibal to have no one he was close with, but the verification was entirely welcome. It humanized him, somehow. Hannibal had seemed eternally to be this otherworldly force to Will. He was a shadow the world cast upon itself—ethereal and strong. Perhaps, considering his interest in the man, that was not a healthy way to view him. He was a man just like any other; a man who saw Will for something good and real rather than discarded and piteous. It was only fair that Will regarded him in much the same way. A man that meshed with his own reality and fit within the puzzle pieces of Will’s mind.

Sometimes Will’s thoughts on Hannibal frightened him. They had a tendency to border on a combination of enchanted and devoted, neither of which seemed appropriate by a practical

standpoint. Hannibal was no god among men and neither was he a great love that consumed. They had not known each other for a suitable time to befit the latter and the former was as ludicrous as it was overly romantic and naïve.

Hannibal was a man and Will desperately wanted to see him as such. He looked to Bahadur for this as though the other man held the key to Hannibal's humanity—the secrets that unlocked the reality of him for Will to understand.

"You left again, my friend."

Will blushed. "Ah, I'm sorry."

Bahadur regarded him thoughtfully for a moment. "He encroaches upon your thoughts quite potently, doesn't he?"

Will nodded, seeing no need to confirm it with words.

"The Greeks have interesting lore, you know."

Will started at the odd statement. It seemed entirely out of place in the conversation and he curiously listened to see what Bahadur would make of it.

Bahadur saw that he had Will's attention and continued. "Hannibal has taught me a great many things. Your language and customs, the sword, of myths and monsters. I've often said he would be equally deadly with a book as with a sword." He laughed to himself. "The myths have always resounded for me. As I've watched the weeks pass and you and Hannibal together, the Greeks come to mind. The Greeks and their lore and their stories and their dramatics."

Will rest an arm over the back of his chair, an uncharacteristic display of comfort for him, and looked at Bahadur with interest. "You fancy this a dramatic telling of some kind? A play to display in the colosseum before an eager crowd?"

"Nothing so obvious." Bahadur had a mysterious glint of knowing in his eyes and he considered his words delicately. "Your story will erect no statues or incite grand gestures, but it reminds me of such fables nonetheless."

"Of any in particular?"

"I should think the display put forth by Aristophanes. His tale of Zeus striking down the beginnings of humanity to gain control over a race that once had the ability to contest the gods."

Will's eyebrows rose. "I know of this. It was Plato who spoke of it. He said that humans were born twice what they have become. Four arms, four legs, a head of two faces, but Zeus found these beings to be too powerful and so he split them apart." Will licked his lips and mulled over the implications of Bahadur's choice. "You can't truly compare this to Hannibal and I, can you? It's premature to make such claims."

“Of two halves of a whole meeting once more?” Bahadur looked amused by Will’s hesitance. “And what makes the observation premature? Would not these two halves recognize each other at once? There would be no hesitation or lapse of time. It is said by Plato himself that should two halves split from one being encounter one another, they would have an understanding of each other that ran deeper than could be measured in words or consciousness. It would be an instant unity. So claims the Symposium.”

“It seems youthful folly to me.”

“It seems unyieldingly grand to me.”

Will rubbed his hands over his face and glanced aside. Their companions were no more interested in the conversation than they had been previously and Will was grateful for it. This was not a conversation he wanted to wander into prying ears, friendly or otherwise. “With this claim, I should know already that I have entered such circumstance. I cannot claim to be so enlightened.”

“Our minds have a funny way of blinding themselves.”

With a long stare, Will found himself understanding why Hannibal and this man were friends. “You’ve spent far too much time with Hannibal. I’m finding you sound much more similar to him than I had first thought.”

At this, Bahadur let out a snap of a laugh and drank of his wine. He seemed immeasurably pleased by the statement. “Such is the result of many years,” he admitted. “He is an influential man. It’s difficult not to be caught in his sway.”

“Yes,” Will said quietly. “I have noticed. Sometimes I do not know if it’s of my own volition.”

“Do you doubt his sincerity?”

Will was silent for a long stretch. “Not his, but my own.”

“You believe he has caught you in rapture—that your thoughts are not your own.”

“I have wondered at it sometimes,” Will responded idly, toying with his drink. “But over time I have come to realize it’s an unlikely scenario.”

“Hannibal would tell you to trust your instincts, so I will say the same.” Bahadur reached over and tapped Will’s glass with his own. “Regardless of your hesitations and the origins of them, Hannibal is no sorcerer. Your actions are your own. I am certain he would be remiss were it to be any other way.”

Will felt the sudden urge to see Hannibal then. All this talking about him was making him fade into a storybook. He wanted to see the man in front of him again; solid and real. “Do you know where he is?”

Bahadur shook his head. “No. The last I saw of him he was discussing the situation with your captains, which I’m sure he found to be entirely displeasing. He does not enjoy conversing

with them."

Will snorted. "Yes, I know."

"But if they have finished, it's likely that he will be ascertaining the state of our quarters." That fond look had overtaken Bahadur's features once more. "He does not often rest. His priority will be to confirm that our housing is safe and accommodating. He will see to us before himself. Of this I am certain."

"A man who knows the value of those who follow him will see great fortune in war."

Everyone at the table looked up in unison at the voice.

Valerian was standing at the head of the table and regarding them all in turn with a quizzical expression. "I must admit," he said. "I wasn't expecting to find such an interesting table awaiting me."

Will opened his mouth to explain but Cimon beat him to it.

"There is concern to the safety of our auxilia here. We sought to lessen their burden of watchful eyes for a time."

Valerian's posture slumped and he sat down in a free chair. "The city guard has seen fit to be entirely useless boars."

Will wasn't sure what surprised him more: The fact that Valerian had called the guard boars or the fact that Cimon had said *our* auxilia. He decided on the former. "You used to be of a city guard, Valerian."

The man in question looked unamused by the observation. "Yes, and they were also boars and I felt boorish with them."

Firuz shuffled awkwardly in his chair. "Will they eject us?" he asked tentatively.

Valerian turned to him, surprised, but there was no sign of maleficence on his face. Will admired how at ease he seemed to be in the unexpected company. "No. As of now, your accommodations are still in place. Sparing any unforeseen events, we have managed to…" He rubbed his eyes and groaned. "Barter for your stay."

Lucas looked wholly displeased by this. "Barter?"

Valerian shook his head, indicating he could not say much. "Suffice it to say that the guard sought negotiations to ease passage. It is dealt with and that is the extent of the concern for now." No one argued. They all knew better than to demand information that was not their right of rank and so Valerian continued to speak. "The auxilia has been given housing towards the east district. Near the river."

"A barracks?"

“Not quite. It seems in a fit of wisdom Antioch has been making preparations for whatever heads our way. They have prepared temporary military housing for any troops that may enter the city.” A look of disgust swept over Valerian’s countenance before he proceeded. Will wondered what memory had struck such distaste within him. “The accommodations were intended for legion, but after some *conversation* we assured that the auxilia is as much a part of the legion as any one of us.” He gestured towards the Romans at the table. “They have given you one of the buildings for a time.”

Will felt relief sag in his bones. “That’s good.”

“For now it is, yes. The hope is that it remains that way.” Valerian’s eyes flickered over to meet Will’s and they took a playful gleam. “The housing is down the road. Ten minutes walk from here if you go left.”

Will’s mouth flapped gracelessly and he muttered something incoherent about not needing to know that.

Valerian simply rolled his eyes and turned to speak his greetings to their other comrades.

Bahadur leaned over and tapped Will’s glass again. “Most of the militia will still be about the city. Now is as good a time as any to seek out Hannibal before he is overrun by mobs of his men complaining about being trapped in this place.”

Will bit his lip and looked around, unsure. “I can’t just leave.”

“You can.”

“But—“ Will’s breath hissed when he took an elbow to the ribs. He turned to see Cimon pointing at the door.

“Oh, just go. Honestly, you’re like a child.” Cimon’s words were laden with affection and amusement like that of a teasing older brother. “My heart will not be broken if you abandon your drink, Will.”

“Are you entirely certain?” Will quipped back. “I wouldn’t want you to wither away without me.”

Cimon’s laugh sounded more like a howl and he shoved at Will’s shoulder. “Get out of here before your distraction drives us all to madness!”

Grudgingly and with a half grin, Will rose from his chair. Not knowing what to say, he nodded his thanks to Bahadur and slipped out of the inn before he could think better of it. He didn’t quite understand the nervousness that was gripping him then. He had spent more than enough time with Hannibal to have eliminated any need for such a menial social anxiety.

But this was different, he supposed. They were in a city now—stopped, stagnant, calm. There was food and roofs and people. This was of a different world. It would not be the same as sitting with someone beside a campfire. Will felt as though he was being reintroduced to society the way a fish was thrown back to sea.

Slightly unsteady by his own self-doubt and the few glasses of wine he had imbibed, Will made his way down the streets in the direction Valerian had told him.

The sun was beginning to hang low in the sky. Sunset would come in the next few hours and soon the orange hue would melt into blues and blacks. Will inhaled deeply of the smells that only a city can provide. Spices and sea salts. Filth and sweat. Dirt and dust and a thousand combinations of food cooking from the houses and stalls. It smelled like life.

He was so lost in taking in the feeling of the cobbled streets and blurs of bodies rushing past that Will reached the riverside more quickly than he had anticipated. He stopped and looked around. The building wasn't hard to find. A stretch down the bay was a scattered group of Persian soldiers, wandering with agitation before a stocky, three-levelled building of stone and mortar.

Will approached them slowly, hoping they would recognize his armor and not view his approach as a threat. Thankfully, they seemed to recognize him and ignored his passing with no more than a few grunts and sweeping of eyes. Will realized then that he had no idea if any of them spoke his tongue and he had nowhere near enough understanding of the Persian language to broach the barrier between them.

"Hannibal?" he asked one of them reluctantly.

"Yes?"

Will gasped and spun around. Hannibal was standing nearby, looking at him with nothing but pure and unadulterated humor. There were lines of stress in the tired darkness of his eyes and Will felt worry sink to his boots. How difficult had the negotiations with the city guard truly been?

"I'm pleased to see you here, Will," Hannibal said finally, walking up to the younger man. "I cannot express how much. It has been a most trying day."

"I have heard some of it," Will replied somberly. "I encountered Bahadur in the market and Valerian, one of our officers, informed us further."

"Bahadur?" Hannibal looked entirely surprised at the mention of the name. "And he is well?"

Will nodded with a tiny smile. "He and a few of your men joined us for drinks. They," Will hesitated and looked at the soldiers nearby. "Were good company."

Hannibal frowned and gestured towards the building. "Please, join me. I would very much like to sit and I sense that you have much to share."

Will nodded and followed Hannibal through the doors, brushing off the nagging doubts of decorum regarding following another man into his chambers in broad daylight. Even if there were others nearby who bothered to witness the encounter, nothing would be thought of it. The action would hold far more implication at night. Regardless, Will kicked himself again for considering what others would think at all.

The accommodations themselves were in a far better state of repair than Will had expected. When Will had heard of the opinions of the city guard, he had fully expected it to be ramshackle and dilapidated. Then, he recalled that this building had initially been intended for Roman soldiers and immediately felt the surprise sour in his gut.

Hannibal's quarters were on the topmost floor at the corner, overlooking the front of the building. Tactically, it was a steadfast choice. He would be able to see anyone coming or going and be far enough away from any initial attack should someone intrude. It was a wise place for a commander to be, all things considered.

Tactics, however, were the last thing on Will's mind when Hannibal shut the door behind them and lit a candle on the table at the side of the room.

The room was simple enough. A table, three chairs, a bed, a chest. It had a wash basin and Hannibal's satchel and packs were already thrown into the corner. But it was a room and it had a bed and Will could barely restrain himself from flopping face first into the coverlet and falling asleep.

Will twitched when he heard the clang of metal and thud of leather and turned to see Hannibal tossing his bracers and swords onto the table.

Hannibal smiled and sat on the edge of his bed to untie his boots. "Please, feel free to do the same. Unless you intend to leave shortly."

"I…" Will faltered, tugging at the straps of his lorica segmentata.

Hannibal chuckled. "I'm not asking you to strip entirely, my dear Will, but I know those adornments of yours are equivalent to the weight of a small child and I have no doubt you would relish the relief of their removal."

Will had no argument there. Roman issued armor was weighty and harsh. It had been holding him down all day like a heavy and unforgiving hand. Hannibal was not attempting a shady pass at him. He was simply offering him comfort as he always did. Will relaxed and began unlooping his bracers. "Thank you."

"Thank me? What for?" Hannibal's amusement had seemed to solidify into never-ending since Will's arrival. It was only then that Will realized that Hannibal's uplift in mood was *because* Will was there. The thought caused his chest to flood with warmth.

"I have been eager for rest for what has felt like years."

"I can understand the sentiment." Hannibal was leaning back on his palms and staring out the window. His boots were set neatly aside and his outermost layer of armor was shed to reveal a sweeping and dark swatch of cloth looping over his chest and shoulders. "You neglected to tell me something outside. About Bahadur." Some of the amusement had faded from his eyes.

Setting his satchel and gladius on the table, Will sighed and sat in one of the chairs to undo his greaves. "I didn't want to upset your men."

“An effort that I am most grateful for. They have had enough stress today.”

“So I’ve gathered,” Will grumbled. His irritation towards the circumstance had not lessened, settling into his throat like a cold stone. “Bahadur informed me that he and a few of the men felt threatened. He thought that perhaps if they were seen in the company of soldiers from the legion, the suspicion might lessen, so we accepted their company.”

“Ever the calculating one, Bahadur,” Hannibal responded. He seemed distantly proud as he said it and Will couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you for assisting him.”

“Don’t thank me.” Will pushed his greaves under the table and wiggles his toes, feeling more comfortable than he had in months. He began working at freeing the iron of his armor. He wasn’t entirely certain why he was doing this. Perhaps the offer for relaxation was far too tempting to resist. Or, perhaps, he had hopes for the night that he had yet to voice. Whatever it was, Will was deciding not to question his own motives too much. He was comfortable in Hannibal’s presence and questioning it would only remove that comfort. “Any decent man would have done the same.”

“Decent men are in short supply.”

Will snorted. “Bahadur said much the same.”

“And yet it is true spoken from either mouth.”

Will gently set his chest plate next to his gladius and heaved a heavy sigh. “I know.” Grimacing, he looked down at his pteruges. It was shorter than the hem of a toga and made of a thick row of leather strips. He hated it.

Hannibal noticed the gaze and raised a brow. “I fear they may be too long for you, but do you wish to try a set of mine?” He gestured towards the loose cloth leggings he wore. “You may find them more to your liking."

Will chewed on his lip and thought over the offer. He had always been curious what it would feel like to wear the clothes that the Persians wore but had always been too embarrassed to ask. “If it’s not an inconvenience. I have wondered.”

Hannibal smiled, his teeth peaking just at the seam of his lips, and stood from the bed to retrieve a pair from his bag. “You are never an inconvenience, Will,” he assured the apprehensive man who was now fumbling even more shakily with his pteruges. “It is only clothing and I personally have always found your version of dress to be terribly uncomfortable.”

“It is!” Will agreed more heartily than he had intended. He would have crawled under the desk in humiliation if it had not earned a rich laugh from his companion.

Hannibal stood and walked over to Will, handing him a pair of the leggings. Will took them with a flush and a nod and Hannibal went back to sit on the edge of the bed.

Will stood there uselessly for a moment. Never in his life had he been embarrassed to change in front of another man before. He was a soldier. He was entirely accustomed to changing and bathing with others. He was even wearing shorts underneath the pteruges, but something was rooting him to the spot and overcoming him with a skittish sense of displacement.

“Does my presence discomfort you?” Hannibal looked genuinely concerned.

Will cursed the other man mentally for being so observant. He cursed himself for being so obvious. “No, it’s not that.”

Hannibal looked him over and moved to stand. “I can wait outsi—“

“No!” Will slapped a hand to his forehead, face blooming with red. “I’m being foolish. I’m sorry. Please, I will not kick you from your own quarters. It’s fine.”

Hannibal slowly reseated himself, looking dubious. “As you wish.”

Gritting his teeth, Will turned sideways so he wasn’t facing the other man and untied his preturges, slipping it over his shorts and tossing it onto the table with a little more vigor than was necessary. His discomfort was preposterous. Hannibal had seen him without his armor before. This was no different. With this thought calming him, Will lifted the leggings to try and determine how to put them on. He realized, belatedly, that he had no idea what he was doing. He turned bashfully to look back at Hannibal. “How do I…” Will trailed off when he saw the look on Hannibal’s face. “I…”

For the first time that Will had known him, Hannibal’s gaze was unguarded. No longer surrounded by soldiers and people—with no one to see—Hannibal’s face was an open book.

He looked ravenous.

Hannibal swallowed quietly as he stared at Will and Will felt suddenly and irreversibly exposed in nothing but his tunic and shorts. The leggings were hanging in his hand, almost entirely forgotten. His mouth was dry. Hannibal’s eyes slowly dragged over him; down and then back up. They took in every inch of him like one would take in a work of art and Will felt his pulse hammering in his neck.

When their eyes met, Will was certain he had stopped breathing.

Then Hannibal spoke.

“Come to me.”

A full body shiver wracked Will’s every bone and he pressed his lips into a tight line. Slowly, he forced his feet to move until he was standing directly in front of the older man, toe to toe, knee to knee, with Hannibal looking up at him with eyes darker than coal. Will’s fingers flexed into the leggings, now hanging uselessly at his side.

With a pace so slight it was as though he were moving towards a frightened fawn, Hannibal lifted his hands to Will’s hips, gently sliding his thumbs under the fabric to rest against the

skin. “Forgive me,” he said, moving his thumbs in a slow, warm circle before tightening his grip and making Will gasp. “I fully intended to do nothing.”

“It’s…” Will couldn’t find the stamina to force words out. His breath was short and harsh and came out in a rush as Hannibal’s hands boldly slipped up underneath his tunic to palm over his stomach. He tried to speak again, but he had barely uttered a syllable before it was all lost to a mess of sound when Hannibal’s hands moved back to cup his rear.

Hannibal’s eyes were wild just past the surface and Will could tell that every passing moment was affecting him just as much as it was Will. He blushed crimson as he realized that all Hannibal had to do was look down and he would see just how affected he truly was. The shorts would hide nothing. He pressed his eyes shut when Hannibal squeezed, kneading flesh, before letting out a stuttered breath and looking down.

When their eyes met once more, the room shifted.

Suddenly, Hannibal was on his feet and Will’s back was thudding against the wall. His cry of surprise never found respite in the air, blocked fully by Hannibal’s mouth crashing to his own. Their bodies were pressed together in every way, Hannibal’s hands still gripping him from behind and shoving their hips together.

Will groaned. He could feel everything; the hard and hot evidence of Hannibal’s enthusiasm digging unmistakably above his groin. He opened his mouth and wrapped his arms around Hannibal’s neck, making a sound of frustration when he realized it was impossible to pull the man closer than he already was. The ferocity of the kiss stunned him. All this time. All the gentle words and calm conversations and tame strolls and now Hannibal was doing just as he had promised back in Tarsus.

He was devouring him whole.

Hannibal sucked Will’s tongue into his mouth with a pleased sound and Will shuddered against him, overwhelmed by anything and everything that was happening. And then Hannibal bit Will’s lip and the younger man bucked into him, causing them both to moan into the sticky heat of the room. Will found his own mind somewhere in the fog and kissed back harder, forcing his tongue into Hannibal’s mouth and earning a fluid roll of hips in return.

Then there were shouts. Yelling. Cursing.

They broke apart and turned to the window. They were both out of breath and flushed from head to toe, praying that they had misheard.

But then the shouts came again, more aggressively this time, and Will’s heart fell.

With what seemed like the most effort Will had ever seen Hannibal put into anything, the taller man pulled away, stroking a palm over the side of Will’s face before moving to grab one of his swords and his boots. He shoved on his boots and hastily glanced back out the window as the shouts escalated. Will began to feel his heart sink lower and lower with dread.

“Don’t go,” he said weakly, still leaning against the wall. “You could be hurt.”

Hannibal frowned and stood, gripping the sheath of his sword tightly. “It’s merely a squabble.” He reached out and stroked Will’s face once more, painstakingly tender, before pulling open the door. “Stay here,” he added almost as an afterthought, halfway out the door. “Wait for me.”

There had been such a plea to that last sentence that Will could only nod, fear gripping his chest like cold ice.

He stood there, suspended in time, as he heard the shouts and footsteps filling the air.

Then, when the metal ring of swords could be heard echoing up through the windows, Will was off the wall like a shot. With rushed and trembling hands, he managed to yank on the leggings that Hannibal had given him and haphazardly tie his greaves before grabbing his gladius and running out the door.

He would not let Hannibal get hurt. He couldn’t let that happen. He refused.

In his haste, he forgot his medical satchel on the table.

Chapter End Notes

How many of you want to strangle me right now?

I'm guessing at least six.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> "Without the one, there would not be the many."

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a lengthy bitch. Sorry it took so long to write. It was a bit plotty so it took some effort.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blood was everywhere. It was all over Will's face and the ground. It was pouring from Hannibal's back and from the belly of the gutted man mere feet away. The world was a splattered gradient of red and viscera and panic.

Men were shouting and swords were being held at half-mast. The reprimanding tones of the city guard were creeping closer, mixing into the yells and the curses. One man was trying to pick up his own severed arm. No one moved to help him.

Will was standing in the middle of it all with wide eyes and white noise in his ears. He couldn't process. He couldn't understand everything that had just happened. This hadn't been like the battlefield. This was complicated and convoluted and it would have consequences that Will wasn't ready to face.

Someone was yelling at him—getting in his face—but Will simply continued to stare blankly at the gutted man on the ground. Had he done that? He had, hadn't he? He couldn't remember doing it, but some distant, foggy place in his mind was telling him that his dripping gladius was dripping from that man's stomach and Will felt queasy.

Townsfolk were huddled nervously at the edges of the bay, peering around and clinging to one another and whispering things. No, this wasn't like the battlefield.

Hannibal hissed in pain and Will's eyes snapped to him as though the string binding him to the dead man had been severed by the scissors of the fates. Hannibal was staring up at him, mouth bloody and eyes gleaming. And then Hannibal lost consciousness, slumping forward on the dirt.

It took a lot of screaming on Will's part; screaming that his throat wasn't used to and made his throat raw because of it. After a good chunk of screaming and arguing, the city guard had

relented and Hannibal's men had helped Will carry their wounded captain back up to his quarters and to Will's medical satchel. He felt like a fool for leaving it up there, but what was done was done. It would be better to have Hannibal on a bed in any case.

Will felt a gnawing and cold fear clutching at his gut but he stomped it down. He had seen the wounds. They weren't mortal. Hannibal would suffer and then survive. Will needed to remember his place, in that moment. He needed to remember himself as a man of healing and repair. He needed to push aside cumbersome emotions and adrenaline and focus on the task at hand.

Hannibal needed him. Will must live up to that need. He refused to be anything less than a man who could piece the Persian back together. It was his fault Hannibal was wounded at all. It was his fault and he would fix it.

Hannibal was settled onto his stomach on the bed and Will wished Bahadur had returned. The auxilia men were all staring at him quietly, hovering back at a respectful distance as Will grabbed his pack and sat down on the edge of the mattress. They were looking at him differently than they had before. They were looking at him with curiosity and acceptance and Will hated that it was because his gladius was dripping and gory and because he was tending to Hannibal now.

Hannibal shouldn't have needed tending to, but he did and that was that.

Will resigned himself to withstand their scrutiny, not knowing the words to ask them to leave. With a sigh and a twitch as he felt the gash on his forehead pinch and trickle down his cheek, he tore the back of Hannibal's shirt open and got to work.

It took over an hour and when it was all said and done, Will felt more exhausted than he had in a long time.

So many stitches that he had lost count. The thread had snapped once and the number of invectives that had flown from Will's mouth when it had happened had caused the men in the room to exchange looks and look at the door as though considering departure.

The gash on Hannibal's back was long and wicked. It had exposed the soft bone at the bottom of his shoulder blade and it had taken everything in Will's power to stop himself from bursting into tears and begging the unconscious man for forgiveness—to not go back outside and gut the dead man once more. He slathered the wound in ointment and packed it over with cloth and a wrapping of bandage and wondered distantly if he would be chastised for overusing his provisions.

He didn't rightly care.

Once Hannibal was properly seen to, all of the men had filtered out of the room, one lingering back and muttering something in Persian as he pointed with concern to Will's own wound.

"I'm fine!" Will snapped, waving his hand through the air. He was tired and angry, but the man seemed to understand and had nodded solemnly before leaving the room.

Will rubbed a hand over the undamaged side of his face and walked over to the window. Sometime in the past hour, the city guard had cleaned up the bodies and pulled them away from prying eyes. All that remained were the dark stains of blood in the dirt. No one had lingered.

The absence of chaos made Will's heart pound in worry. It meant he couldn't know what to expect. He couldn't know what would happen. He was no fool. This was going to cause problems. This was going to result in something unpleasant. There was no other way it could go, especially with Will's involvement.

He may very well be discharged, tied to a stake, rejected to some cell to be alone with himself and his mistakes. These were all possibilities; among many others.

"You look a fright."

Will would have jumped if he had possessed any remaining fight within him. As it was, all he could manage was a surprised raise of his brows as he turned around to see Hannibal staring at him from the bed, face half covered by the feather pillow bracing it up. "Don't get up."

Hannibal let out an amused huff of breath, but it seemed pained and he shut his eyes for a moment. "I didn't intend to." There was a pause filled with nothing but the both of them breathing, shaky and damaged. "You tended to me?"

Will swallowed and nodded. He moved forward to sit down on the floor by the bed, for lack of better options, and stared Hannibal in the face. "I did."

With some effort, Hannibal moved his hand from the bed and reached out to stroke the side of the younger man's face. "I am grateful."

Will let his eyes hood and enjoyed the warmth of the palm on his skin. "My interference caused you that wound."

Fingers were pushing Will's chin and tilting his head up to meet dark eyes. "Your interference saved me from a much more dire wound. This scratch will heal. Death will not."

Will snorted, but didn't move away. "A bit more than a scratch, Hannibal."

"Let me be optimistic," Hannibal teased. Thoughtfully, he rubbed his thumb over Will's bottom lip. "I regret that we could not finish what we started."

Face flushing with heat, Will finally ducked his head away. "Could not or cannot?"

"Could not. We will."

"Is that really the best idea?"

Hannibal seemed surprised by this, momentarily caught off guard. "I was under the impression you enjoyed yourself."

“I did!” Will groaned and brought his knees up to his chest. “Perhaps I’m giving too much thought to fate and circumstance.”

“You think we were interrupted for a reason,” Hannibal replied slowly. He chewed on the concept. “Whereas I see the result of the night being that you saved my life, not that we were hindered in any other fashion. It all comes down to time, Will.” He smiled when his eyes were met once more. “And because of you, we have more of it.”

Will pursed his lips. “You’re more of a romantic than I can ever hope to be.”

“Outwardly, perhaps.”

Will just snorted again and said nothing.

“You’re wounded.”

As if only remembering his own state now, Will gingerly touched his own face. “It’s nothing.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “It’s something. Please see to yourself or allow me to see to you.”

“Nothing needs to be seen to.”

“I will sit up if you do not acquiesce.” As though to prove his point, Hannibal pressed his palm into the bed and moved to rise.

Will quickly stood, holding his palms out in a rushed defeat. “Alright, alright! You win.”

“As I should have,” Hannibal grunted, settling back down into the cover. “I would prefer not to lose you to something as trivial as infection.”

Hannibal let his eyes drift shut and Will was glad for it. The other man’s words had made his face bloom a bright red. Hannibal would prefer not to lose him, which meant that he felt that he had him to lose. Will chewed his lip and went to retrieve his bag.

It was a correct assumption, of course. Will could find no argument against it. For better or worse, Hannibal had the parts of him that mattered. Will had spilled blood for him now. There was nothing to be earned from questioning the depth of whatever they had become.

It felt nice to know there was someone who viewed him in such a way. A prized possession. Something cherished.

Perhaps Will was building it all up, narcissism getting the better of him, but every time he saw the way Hannibal looked at him—all soft eyes and tilting smiles—he knew that he was not being overly generous with his own perception.

The cut was nothing to be concerned about. Will’s memory was fuzzy as he tried to recall receiving it. The whole fight was a blur of noise and light. He patched himself up and turned back to Hannibal, shoulders sagging when he saw that the man had fallen asleep. The

temptation to go to him was a strong one—to lay beside him and feel his warmth—but Will thought better of it.

With a sigh, he slung the strap of his satchel over his shoulder and left the room, armor tucked clunky and bulky under his arm. He was still wearing Hannibal's leggings. He hoped the other man wouldn't mind. He doubted he would.

Will was halfway down the hall when he was stopped by none other than an aggravated Bahadur.

For a moment, Will froze, fearing the irritation was directed at him, but the Persian's face softened upon seeing him and Will relaxed.

"Where are you going?"

Will shuffled his feet awkwardly, shifting the cumbersome chest plate in his grip. "It would probably be best if I returned to Roman barracks."

Bahadur stared at him incredulously. "Then you haven't considered fully the repercussions of your actions."

Will's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He sputtered. "That's precisely why I am departing. It would be unwise for me to linger."

With a heavy sigh, Bahadur's look was condolatory. "Perhaps so, but…" he rubbed the back of his neck and trailed off. "I sincerely doubt the departure would be a safe one, Will."

Will paled.

The sympathetic pity only seemed to deepen at the pallor of the younger man's face. "Will, we are all very grateful for what you did."

"But what I did was foolish and reckless."

"It was."

Will's fingers dug into the metal of his lorica segmentata and he dug his heel into the wood of the floor. "What was I to do?" he hissed through clenched teeth. He could feel his pulse rattling in his temples as his mind raced in search of any other options he'd had at the time. "Let that cretin kill Hannibal?"

Bahadur's face was helpless and resigned. "I only have second hand accounts. From what I'm told, you did right by Hannibal and the auxilia. I cannot begin to explain to you the level of gratitude resounding through this residence at this moment." He gestured out the window down the hall and towards the drying mess down below. "Regardless, you *must* know what will come from this, both in the immediate and in afterthought."

The lump in Will's throat was hard and rough. Any attempt to swallow past it made him feel ill. "I have some idea."

“Then perhaps you should reconsider your departure,” Bahadur replied reasonably. “The streets may not be safe for you right now. Soldier of the legion or otherwise, you killed a resident of Antioch. That man was no soldier and no guard. He may very well have been a noble. Night has fallen. You will not be safe.”

Will blinked, silent. He had not considered this. Throughout all of the panicked meanderings of his mind, all he had incessantly returned to was the fear of consequence within the legion itself. He was so consumed with militial regulation and punishment that he had hardly stopped to consider the reaction of Antioch itself.

He felt naïve and ignorant for being blind to the blatantly obvious.

Will had gutted a common man in the middle of city streets. Instigated or not, that was not something to be taken lightly from any class or rank. The city was tense as it was with the looming threat of invasion and the unwilling accord struck to allow the auxilia passage. Now, not only had a Roman legionary murdered a civilian, but he had done it in service of the very men whom the people of Antioch vehemently wanted removed from their home.

Bahadur was right. It wouldn’t be safe for him to leave the confines of the militia’s appointments.

Will groaned and hugged his armor to his chest. “I don’t know what to do.”

Frowning, Bahadur placed a hesitant hand of comfort on the other man’s shoulder. “A small room down the hall is open to you. Rest and prepare yourself for what is to come tomorrow. I’ve no doubt that you will be…” He bit his lip and avoided Will’s eyes. “Retrieved come sunrise.”

Retrieved. Will’s chest felt hollow. His gut wrenched and coiled at the thought of Roman officers coming at daybreak to cart him off to a cell, to questioning, or to worse. He felt the threat of tears burning at his eyes, but he blinked them away and shook his head vigorously to clear it. It would not do to fall apart now. He was not some weeping child caught breaking pottery. He was a soldier and he would act like one.

Will had no doubt in his mind that he had done the right thing. He would fight until the end to prove it so. Shoulders hanging in tired defeat and jaw clenched with stubborn intentions, Will nodded grudgingly. “Alright. Thank you for thinking of me, Bahadur.”

Bahadur chuckled and led him down the hall. “You didn’t seem to be, so someone had to.”

After a few more muttered thanks and platitudes, Will was left alone in a small room. Bed, shelf, basin. With a groan, will chucked his belongings onto the floor carelessly and fell into a pathetic heap onto the bed. He winced when the cut on his forehead pressed uncomfortably into the pillow and turned to stare up at the splintering wood of the ceiling.

Despite all of the stress and unknown indignities he was sure to face in the coming day, the softness of the bed was like a cocoon. It surrounded him with a physical comfort that he had been sorely bereft of for months. Against all of his best efforts to remain awake and continue

to pointlessly ponder all the ways circumstance could become his enemy, Will found himself drifting off as soon as his eyes slipped closed.

When his eyes opened, he stumbled.

He was storming down the stairs, gladius in hand as he ran towards the shouts outside. A distant ringing in his mind was yelling that he had forgone his armor like a fool. He petulantly ignored the telltale beat of its warning.

When Will burst through the threshold of the barracks, his greaves slid through dirt and dust, clouding it up into the hot air.

Hannibal had his sword drawn and was standing back, attempting to ward off three furious men. When Will gave them a quick once over, he realized that the men were not soldiers or guards, but common folk. Two were dressed in silks and finer fabrics with their noses upturned and their eyes beady with ignorance, leaving the implication of nobility hanging high and threatening in the air. They were shouting but the confusion and clamor of it all left Will floundering to understand their words for a moment.

“We don’t want you here!”

Will blinked. Of all of the things he had expected to be hollered into the tension of the air, he found it unforgivably ironic that the most predictable had not been what he had expected.

Hannibal held his ground. “That may be so, but we are permitted.” He was remarkably calm and composed. It was a stark contrast to the men of his company. The militia soldiers were riled and eager, hands on the hilts of their blades and teeth bared. They were ready for a fight.

Will knew as well as Hannibal did that such a fight could not come to pass.

“Your kind aren’t welcome here,” one of the men snarled. He was wearing bright colors that made Will’s eyes burn.

Hannibal smiled, still not moving. “And what kind would that be?”

The man in plainer cloth took a step forward. Will saw that he had a sword in his hand. It was of awful make—an inexperienced blacksmith likely to blame. He doubted the sword had ever seen battle. “You know damn well—“ He cut off when one of his companions pushed a hand to his chest and shook his head.

“How do we know there are not spies among you? How can we be certain of your loyalties?”

Will scowled and moved closer. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Will!”

Will froze. Hannibal was looking at him with firm and demanding eyes. He looked shocked and upset by Will’s presence. Will could practically feel the other man’s desire for him to return to the safety of the building. He made no such retreat, but he amended to fall silent at Hannibal’s plea.

Hannibal took a deep breath and turned back to the civilians. “I can assure you that we are entirely within the employ of the Roman legi—“

“Precisely so!” One of the men crowed, interrupting Hannibal. Will wanted to bash his face in. “*Employ*. You hold no allegiance here. You are simply beggars in for coin. You will turn on us as soon as Ardashir takes the border!”

One of the auxilia yelled something in Persian and Hannibal shot him a dark look of warning. “Were we a threat to you, I assure you that your guard would not have allowed us passage or accommodation.”

A snort. “Our guard is foolhardy and useless. They have no rights to dictate the wants of the people.” The man shifted and Will glowered as he saw he too was holding a sword. This one was of finer make—by a craftsman who smithed for looks and status rather than utility. Though the sword had likely not seen battle, there was little doubt that it had seen the blood of servants.

Will looked around imploringly into the emptiness of the bay; for guards, for legionaries, for *anyone* who could put a stop to this before something irreversible befell them all. There was no one but the clusters of curious and frightened townsfolk hovering back at the edges, awaiting the outcome.

His attention snapped back when the commoner made move to step forward again.

“Please,” Hannibal said stiffly. “If you approach, I will defend. I do not wish violence.”

“It’s all you savages know.”

Will felt bile in his throat as the words dripped from the noble’s mouth. They were so full of venom and disgust that he felt poisoned by them.

Unfortunately, the comment was all the provocation an auxilia soldier had needed to lose his temper. He had lurched forward, hollering angrily with his sword still undrawn as his hip. It was no threat of violence—only of rage—but it was all the motivation the assaulters had needed. They lunged, the third hanging back for lack of a weapon, and everything happened at once.

Whenever Will was removed from battle in the confines of a town or the openness of the road, he forgot how time would slow down in moments of violence and brutality. It was a curious warp of duration. It was all over in an instant and yet every moment was afforded a full and steady breath.

Hannibal’s sword moved like it was nothing. It was in one place one moment and another the next and suddenly the screams of the noble were echoing and a finely plated sword was thudding onto the ground. The man’s fingers were still clenched around the hilt, gripping desperately. It took Will an inordinate amount of time to realize that the man owning those fingers was standing a good ten feet away, one less arm than he had arrived with.

The poorer man witnessed his fellow dismembered and he howled with purpose, charging at Hannibal with a wave of his poorly-slimmed blade.

Somehow, Will had expected him to be dealt with just as the first. Hannibal was a talent unrivaled with the sword, but he was restraining himself. He was overcautious and hesitant. So determined was he to ensure the appointments of his auxilia that he was sluggish and undecided. It had destroyed any sense of proper reflex or consideration.

The sound that left Will's mouth was surely not his own when Hannibal narrowly dodged the frantic swing of the other man's blade. Will's feet were not his own. His arm was not his own. His actions belonged to another. From the moment he realized Hannibal's own hesitance, he knew he would be unable to stand idly by.

Will's gladius caught the man's second swing with a loud and piercing ring of metal and impact. And then, the feral focus was turned entirely towards him. Eyes wide, Will fended off his attacker as best he could, trying fervently to pull up the memories of his infrequent and short trainings with Hannibal. The commoner was unskilled and bulky. He didn't know how to swing a blade. Will matched him blow for blow, but the other man was stronger. Each connect of their swords was pushing Will back by force alone until he stumbled and felt a sear as the tip of singing metal sliced over his brow.

In the same instant that pain flared up over his face, Hannibal was before him. The older man grabbed him and pushed before his crimson eyes went wide with shock and he faltered.

Will couldn't understand what was happening. Hannibal was letting his sword drop in shock. The auxilia men were screaming and shouting now and blades were being drawn. The third civilian had long since fled. But Hannibal was falling to his knees with an inexplicably pained grimace and Will couldn't understand *why.*

Then he saw the blood. It was seeping through the tear in Hannibal's back, coating the pathetic excuse for a sword in the townsman's hand. And Will understood.

Will had been a distraction. He had required assistance. And as such, Hannibal had suffered a blow on his behalf.

A type of mania consumed him then. It was bred of ire and guilt and panic. Will hurled forward over Hannibal's crumpled form, gladius swinging out and rushing noise in his ears.

The blade went across easier than he thought it would. It was just the slightest pull and catch and the man was falling back with gasping and gurgling lips and sloppy slaps of his entrails fumbling out of his belly. Will watched, shocked, as the man attempted to grab his own organs to keep them from falling, but it was to no avail. With a wheeze, he fell to the ground.

Will simply stared. He could smell iron and salt. He could see red and yellows and disgusting browns. There was a dead man on the ground. Will had put him there and so he stared.

He knew the guards had arrived when he heard the authoritative tones of crowd control. Townsfolk were being warded back and surefooted steps were heading right for the center of the carnage.

All Will could do was stare at the body on the ground, feeling strangely disconnected and satisfied.

When suddenly there were swords being waved at him, Will realized he hadn't donned his armor and hastily explained he was of the legion. He repeated his rank, over and over, as the guards hovered back uncertainly, demanding to know why he was at the auxilia's holdings—why there was a dead man lying in the dirt.

After urging them to find Caeso until his throat was sore and raw from the begging, the guards finally relented and allowed Will and the soldiers of the militia to drag Hannibal's unconscious body back into the building. Will was gripping the other man by the shoulders, doing his best to support the weight and feeling weaker by the second. Hannibal was larger than he was. He was more solid. Even with the help of the others, the journey up the stairs was an arduous one.

When Hannibal had finally been placed on the bed, Will heaved a sigh of relief.

But then, things were not as he remembered. The moment was morphing into something new and tempestuous. The air quivered and shook and suddenly it was only Will and Hannibal in the room and Hannibal's back was bleeding more profusely now.

"No!" Will yanked off his own tunic, pressing it to the wound in a frantic attempt to calm the flow. But it was everywhere. It was spilling over the sides of the bed and onto the floor. More than any one man could hold. It was endless—torrential—and Will felt the panic and fear clawing up at every last nerve ending and setting him on fire. "Please stop!" He pressed harder as though that would change things; as though it would stop the course of events as they were stacking up before him.

Red clouded his vision. It coated the room. Hannibal was gone now, leaving Will with nothing but the bloody tatters of his shirt and a river of lost life. Will shed no tears. They were caught back behind his eyes like stones. Rather than weep, he simply sat there. He was alone.

In the hollow emptiness of the room, he whispered despondently. "Come back."

Will's eyes snapped to reality so quickly he felt his head spin. Panting and soaked to the bone with sweat, he sat up in his bed, glancing around to confirm that there was no blood. There was nothing but quiet and plain walls. With a stinted level of dread, he realized that sun was beginning to seep through the window.

It was morning.

He half expected a barrage of officers to burst through the door at any moment to haul him away, but no such thing happened. Instead, the morning was a deceitfully quiet one. Will dressed, making sure to latch every piece of his lorica segmentata into its proper place, and ate quietly with the men who were already awake. None of them said anything to him, knowing full well that he would have nothing to say in return.

Will had considered, briefly, going up to check on Hannibal before he left. In the end, he decided against it. Hannibal's wounds would heal. Will had seen to them. If he saw Hannibal now, it would only serve to bring his tapered anxiety back to the surface and rage at his mind. He needed to be calm. He needed to be resolute. Emotions would have no place; not on that particular morning.

Bahadur had found him in the main hall when he was making his way outside. The two men stood silently for a long while, each trying to find the proper words to speak to one another. Will was staring at the floor and Bahadur sighed resignedly.

"I will walk you to your barracks."

Will shook his head and licked his chapped lips. "No. It's unwise."

The Persian frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. "I fear for your safety."

Will's eyebrows rose. He hadn't expected that response. Bahadur had been nothing but kind to him, but for him to feel genuine concern for his wellbeing was surprising. Will felt embarrassed—undeserving. "I doubt any townsfolk will recognize me. They were at a distance and I was not in my armor. To them, I will blend in as yet another soldier of the legion." He rubbed his temple and adjusted the strap of his satchel. "I mean no offense—"

"But my presence would hinder you upon arriving at your barracks," Bahadur offered. He didn't appear to be bothered by the information. His irritation seemed solely reserved for the situation. "Your relation to the auxilia will be questioned, no doubt."

Will grimaced and continued to stare at the floor. "It's likely. You know as well as I do that punishment is a likely consequence. I would not want them to associate you with their anger."

"I would tell you that we will stand by you, but our stance will mean startlingly little."

"The intention is gratifying enough."

Bahadur heaved another sigh that mixed and mingled with the stress of the dawn. After a short internal dispute, he settled on defeat. "Hannibal will wish to know the result of this chaos."

The lump settled deep and thick in Will's gut was roiling. "I've no doubt he will hear of it either way. This will not come down to me and me alone. Though I regret that."

"What have you to regret?" Bahadur stepped forward in a gesture of understanding. "Our presence is the source of this turmoil, not your intervention. You are a good man, Will. Take comfort in the fact."

Will chuckled bitterly. "It's not all that comforting right now."

Bahadur's brows knit together in sadness and he stepped back once more, leaving the path through the door free and clear. "I hope it comes to be. In times of struggle, the only comfort we can take is in the knowing of ourselves and the confidence of that knowing."

“You’re sounding like him again,” Will laughed.

The laugh was returned. “And still I find this to be a compliment.”

Will smiled softly and made his way out the door. “It is one,” he muttered quietly to himself, unsure if the other man had heard him or not. Bahadur gave him no response and made no move to follow. Will almost wished he had chosen to join him despite his protestations. Now that he was out of the building and alone—exposed—on the street, he felt a trembling of disconcertion rising along each notch of his spine.

He walked slowly through the streets feeling paranoid and ostracized. Every set of eyes he saw, he felt like that set was staring him down; condemning him for killing one of their own. His mind ran wild with images of being mobbed and beaten down with rocks and poorly crafted blades.

But the stares were only in his mind. No one paid him any heed. No one even batted an eye. Just as Will had told Bahadur, these people saw him as just another among the myriad of legionaries swarming the city of Antioch.

The relief was dulled by a nervous pulse and far too many thoughts of what was to come.

Will felt his heart drop out of his chest when he reached the barracks. There, sitting back against the front wall and looking haggard and lost, was Caeso. When their eyes met, Will thought he might cry or run just to escape seeing the disappointment on his friend’s face.

Caeso stood quickly, stumbling over with exhaustion and overworked nerves, and clapped him on both shoulders with sweaty palms. His eyes were dark and sleepless and his mouth was etched into a deep frown. “Will.”

Will couldn’t meet his gaze. “Hello, Caeso.”

“Will, I’m not angry with you.”

Somehow, the words made it past the dull ache in Will’s head and he looked up.

Caeso shut his eyes and pulled Will into a brief hug. “I’m glad you’re alive. I’m furious that you did something so foolish. I’m concerned for what you must know by now is to come. Mostly, though,” Caeso paused and looked past Will’s shoulders; into the city and the stench of its mistrust. “I despise this. All of this. This fucking war. These damned people and their ignorance.” He groaned and ran a hand through unkempt locks dulled to orange by lack of care and the angle of the sun. “My own ignorance, at times.”

Will shook his head. “This cannot be on your head.”

“But it should be. What leader am I who cannot protect his own men?” Caeso lowered his voice as quickly as it began to rise, desperately attempting to curb his own frustration. “*All* of my men.”

Will had nothing to say, then. Caeso was not only taking the burden of responsibility for Will’s actions, but for the actions taken against the auxilia.

“I had no idea the citizens would be so bold.”

“You had no way of knowing.”

Caeso laughed humorlessly. “It is my job to know, Will.”

“You are no god. You cannot possibly foresee the future.”

“This was clear. Decimus told me as much and I was stubborn in ignoring his council.”

Will rubbed his forearms. “Decimus is a pessimist at the best of times.”

Caeso gave the other man a severe look. “With good reason and you know it.”

Chewing on his lip, Will shuffled on his feet uncomfortably. Caeso may not be angry with him, but the same would likely not be said for his superiors. “What do I face?”

Caeso’s countenance softened just so. “Not treason, if that’s your expectation.”

Will’s shoulders sagged in the most complete way, the depth of his former fear rolling off of him in waves. “Then my sentencing—“

“There will be no sentencing if I am to have my say,” Caeso cut him off finitely, the tiredness on his face taking on an edge of determination. “I have heard accounts of the incident. Messengers from the auxilia and townsfolk who bear no similar hatred as the attackers. You acted defensively. You were protecting our own.”

“The guard will not take kindly to you referring to them as our own,” Will murmured cautiously.

Caeso practically sneered and it was an expression that did not suit him in the slightest. “The guard has no power in this. They knew of those men’s intentions and made no effort to pacify them. They are at fault as much as the men who attacked you.”

Will recognized the righteous vengeance in his friend’s eyes and he knew it was a dangerous thing. It would blot out logic and diplomacy. It would make Caeso vehement and impulsive. He needed to calm the other man, somehow, but he was too far gone in his own concerns to know how to do so. “Will the auxilia be ejected from the city?”

For a moment, it looked as though Caeso was going to snap at the question. In the end, the legatus seemed to think better of it. “I do not know. I will fight against it.”

“I…” Will chewed his lip harder now. He was unsure if he was overstepping in spite of their closeness. “Is this not vastly different from former opinions?”

Caeso appeared confused as he blinked down at Will, processing the question. Understanding slowly began to dawn and he looked away. “I never enjoyed the appointment of auxilia to our century,” he said honestly. His palm was resting steadily on the hilt of his gladius. It shone heavy in the rising light. “The tensions that it has the ability to rile within the ranks is something I do not enjoy handling. I despise the politics of it, Will.” He let out a soft breath.

“But I do not hate the men. They have spilled blood with us. They have befriended you, someone who is most precious to me. You are my brother and they have sheltered you and earned your loyalty. For all of these things, they have earned my acknowledgement of their place in our ranks. By coin or not, these men have never wronged us.”

Will nodded and followed Caeso’s gaze down the street. It was beginning to come alive as people awoke and commenced their daily lives.

It was one thing to resent and mistrust when alone with oneself. When on the road, sheltered from all other influence and requirements, it was all too simple to fall into routines of judgement. But here, in a city full of fear, it was easy to recognize who you truly were when placed back into the world once more. Will understood Caeso’s perspective.

Caeso had resented the requirement of a militia—perhaps even judged them unintentionally because of it—but upon witnessing the unjust nature of Antioch’s citizens, that judgment had quickly turned to loyalty. It was the same way in which siblings would feel a requirement towards one another. They could argue amongst themselves all they liked. They could tease and insult and squabble. But should a stranger come knocking on the door to bring disdain or scorn, the siblings would remember what they were to one another in face of adversity that was unwelcome and uninvited.

Together. Bound by blood.

Spilled or bred, blood was blood. Soldiers knew this.

“If not treason, then what do I face?” Will asked eventually, sensing that they were only postponing the inevitable now.

“That’s as far as my knowledge reaches,” Caeso responded with a dull monotony. “I was charged with securing you.”

“Securing me.”

“You know what I mean, Will.”

A sigh.

“I have to bring you to the auguraculum.” Caeso was pressing more firmly on his sword now as a way to stabilize his own resolve. “The general. He is here and wishes to speak with you.”

Will swallowed roughly. The general. The legatus augusti pro praetore. He was appointed by the emperor himself and in command of multiple legions. Serving as governor of the province housing his station, he was the highest commanding officer for miles. And he wanted to speak to Will.

This was not something to be taken lightly.

“Personally?”

“Personally,” Caeso confirmed. “I do not know why, so please don’t ask me. Perhaps it is a good sign.”

Will scoffed. “How can this possibly be a good sign?”

Caeso’s eyebrow rose, straining to keep his patience schooled. “If he wished punishment immediately, he would have no reason to speak with you. It seems he has yet to come to a decision if he seeks your conversation.”

Will squared his shoulders and cracked his neck. “Well then. Let’s be off. I’m tired of waiting to find out what this day entails. I wish to see it done, one way or another.”

The legatus pressed his lips in a fine line and stared up north towards the auguraculum. “You and I both.”

The walk was a quiet one, loaded painfully by insecurity and doubt. Caeso had walked closely to Will in some attempt at comfort by proximity and Will had appreciated him for it. Some part of him felt like Caeso should be far more angry with him than he was. The anger would be justified. Will had put himself and the reputation of the century at risk by attacking civilians, but Caeso was right. The auxilia was a part of the century—by extension—and civilian or not, those men had attacked them with the intention to kill.

Surely the general would see the reason behind Will’s actions. He would place the safety of his men and the men in the employ of Rome over the absurdity of the situation. Surely he would understand.

As Will stood in the forefront of the auguraculum, the “surely” repeating itself over and over again in his head was slowly transforming into a “maybe” and then a “hopefully”. Dubious became paranoid once more as the silence of the building choked him unforgivingly. A few priests teetered on by, paying no mind to the presence of the soldiers in the halls.

The auguraculum of Antioch was much larger than most Will had seen, enough to be considered more than a simple hut of thatched roof and candles. It was still of a lesser kind than those on the seven hills of Rome; vastly inferior to the citadel or Palatine hill. Those were temples of stone and pillars and were as intimidating as they were possessing of the spiritual nature of prediction. Augurs would inhabit these places, watching the birds with their stones and predicting the future and offering warnings or good tidings in times of war.

It was customary for the military commander to take daily auspices as part of his stay. This was only employed more religiously during campaigns such as the one they were facing now.

Still, Will was surprised he had been summoned during the general’s auspice. It was usually a time reserved for a respect to tradition and order. Perhaps, Will realized, that was precisely why he had been brought to this place. Here, he would be less pressed to argue, tongue held in check by the guiding hand of the fates themselves.

Will sniffed and shifted on his feet uncomfortably, linking his hands behind his back and trying his very best to look the part of a dutiful soldier. Caeso was stiff and still beside him, awaiting the general with an oppressed acceptance.

They stood there until Will's back ached and his calves argued for movement. Will dared not ask what was keeping the general, content to delay the inevitable almost as much as he was overwrought with a desire to end the masquerade entirely. He counted his blessings when there was movement and murmurs and a wooden door opened to give way to the stern man for whom they had come.

Legatus augusti Laurentinus regarded look with an impassive expression, the line of his broad jaw relaxed and strong. He took the few necessary steps to stop before them and mirrored Will's position—arms back, chest out, chin up. Will couldn't help but notice how much stronger he looked than Will himself. The man was a rock in the same way Cimon was a mountain. His hair was greyed by time and experience and each line crowing out from his eyes spoke of a different knowledge. This man had seen things and the years seemed to have calmed him to it. It was the kind of passivity that only the best leaders were able to maintain; the ones who had seen more than enough war to know every way it could result.

"Sir," Will said when the silence became too much for him to bear.

Laurentinus smirked, ever so, and continued to say nothing for a moment, making Will fear he had stepped out of line. Thankfully, he relented. "You must be Willhelm, the immunes I have been hearing so much about."

It took all of Will's restraint not to correct the usage of his full name. Now was not the time for such petty concerns. "Hearing of me, sir?"

The smirk remained but oddly it took on the lilt of a smile. Laurentinus seemed amused. The anger Will had been expecting was sorely lacking. "I am told you run in unique social circles. Does the company of your fellow Roman not appease you?"

Will recognized the lure of a trap when he heard one. His mouth flapped.

Laurentinus continued to smile, shaking his head. "I find Romans tiresome myself, on occasion." He glanced at Caeso. His gaze was firmer, then, but the smile remained.

Will found uncertainty growing in his belly like a plague. He couldn't understand the general's intentions. "I have no qualm with my fellows," he responded carefully. "I am friend to many of my comrades."

"So I have heard," Laurentinus said once more, the implication of his words heavy and deep. Yet still, he did not sound disapproving. It was positively baffling. "It seems some forget that the term 'comrade' does not extend simply to countrymen."

Entirely unsure if he should allow himself to feel relieved, Will remained stiff and perplexed, glancing at Caeso for any indication of what was going on. Caeso, to his credit, looked completely unaffected. Years of training and practice left the legatus' face smooth and blank.

Laurentinus chuckled and crossed his arms over his chest. His voice was deep and it rumbled. "Take a breath, boy. I am not pleased, but I am not consumed by ire either."

Will swallowed. "I'm afraid my nerves suffer at the moment, sir."

“As they should be,” the general replied. “You killed a civilian, Willhelm. This is a serious charge regardless of circumstance.” Will bowed his head and listened as the general continued. “The city guard demands of me that I expel both you and the auxilia to the outer reaches. They want you cast beyond the gates.”

Will shut his eyes. He was struck with regret and despair at the possibility of such an occurrence.

“But I do not take demands from the city guard.”

Will’s head shot up. He dared not speak a word. The situation was entirely beyond him and he felt as though any utterance on his part would cause it all to crumble.

Caeso spoke for him. “You will not expel the auxilia?”

Laurentinus shook his head. “I will not. These demands are foolish ones. They are fueled by nothing but fear and the desire to act in a situation where action is denied them. Though I understand their fear, I will not placate it. As the governing head of Antioch for the time being, it is my responsibility to maintain the order and dignity of my post. This includes the social state the city may find itself in.”

“You believe placation would serve to reinforce the concerns rather than assuage them,” Caeso added slowly, eyes narrowed in consideration.

The general looked pleased by the assessment. “I do not believe. I know. To give in to such impulsive demands would be to reassure them that their fears are warranted. They are not. I have heard much of your auxilia, Caeso. Much to my pleasure, all of those things have been good ones. This is a rare occurrence. Furthermore, my scouts report to me that the auxilia’s captain maintained a steadfast determination to avoid violence and that your immunes here,” he nodded at Will. “Only retaliated after those men were foolish enough to attack armed soldiers.”

Will couldn’t help himself. “You had scouts there?”

“I have scouts everywhere.”

Will felt foolish as soon as he had asked the question. Of course the general would have scouts in the city. He would need to be aware of events occurring. Any experienced leader would make every effort to maintain the endurance of his awareness.

“General,” Caeso cushioned Will’s embarrassment by speaking once more. “May I confess that I find this reception surprising?”

“You may and I understand how it could be.” Laurentinus widened his stance and Will noticed how he was clad solely in heavy, woven robes instead of armor. It was likely due to being in the auguraculum. “Luckily, I am not the type to think that emotion has any place in war. Do I find the situation particularly pleasant? No, but I am not willing to set asunder one of the best centuries in my legion. You cohort is ranked accordingly, Caeso. Your men have

won more battles than most and have had the fewest counts of treason and trial brought against them. You are of our topmost."

Caeso lowered his head humbly at the praise. Will could tell he was trying not to let his chest puff at the words. "Thank you, sir."

"Do not thank me just yet. This praise is limited," Laurentinus said sternly. "This is an opportunity for you, Caeso. Demonstrate yourself and your capabilities. You have brought your men into unwelcoming territory. I can deny the requests to eject your men, but even I can only do so much to quell the nerves of the townspeople and the guard. You are on blatantly thin ice in Antioch. I will not allow for further reciprocity unless warranted."

"There will be no retaliation from my men, Roman or otherwise."

"I should hope not. Your men are just as susceptible to fear as the commoners who drown the streets in it. It is your duty as their leader to see to it that they do not succumb to it."

Caeso nodded dutifully.

Appeased by the action, the general's attention turned again to Will. Will's spine stiffened on instinct and he feared it might snap itself from the strain. "And you." Laurentinus pursed his lips in thought. "Tread lightly, Willhelm. Men not nearly as old and tired as I will not be so understanding of your alliances, especially when such alliances bring reminder of what is to come."

"They have no devotion to their homeland." Will was wringing his hands behind his back. "This mistrust is unwarranted."

Laurentinus looked at him pityingly as though he lamented Will's youth. "I agree. Try as I might, I cannot alter the opinions of men, only serve to sway them. This is no simple situation we find ourselves in. Communication between the legions is frayed and haphazard." He walked to the doorway and stared out over the city from the hill. Will and Caeso turned with him, listening. "There is talk of emperor Severus intending to arrive in Antioch in the coming months. Scouting parties report sights of Persian armies near the Mesopotamian borders and yet no one can seem to pinpoint precisely where these sightings originate. We are in a state of chaos and in such times it takes the simplest things to tip the scale."

With a heavy and burdened sigh, Laurentinus turned to face them. "In times such as these, loyalty is a vital attribute and one that I hold in high regard. That being said, I hold wisdom in similar esteem. The wisdom to recognize the situation you have found yourself in."

Will frowned. "Do you wish for me to avoid the auxilia?"

"Not at all. I believe that at this point your connection to the auxilia may very well be the only thing that is keeping them from turning away our coin and leaving entirely," the general explained. "In such an action, I would not find it in me to fault their decision. Their safety is at risk here and in a place where safety should not be a concern. If it weren't for your intervention as a Roman soldier, there is a strong likelihood that the auxilia would have felt abandoned by the legion in their time of need and sought retribution or escape."

Will swallowed thickly. He hadn't thought of it that way. "One man cannot possibly have such impact."

"Willhelm, though I despise that your actions were necessary, they are far more bearable than the alternatives that would have presented had you not been with the auxilia during the assault." Laurentinus showed, briefly, how tired he was in rubbing his forehead and shutting his eyes. "All it takes is one man to win a battle or a war. Without the one, there would not be the many. All that I can ask of you is that should you be approached by civilians, do your best to avoid further violence. I will appoint stricter watches on the streets." He fixed Caeso with a commanding stare. "You, legatus, will appoint your men on posts both at your barracks and the appointments of the auxilia. Let the people of the city see that the auxilia is still under the flag of Rome, regardless of incidents occurring. Our displayed support will give them pause."

"Absolutely, sir."

"We cannot afford to lose the auxilia. Beyond my men and the city guard, your century is the only established military footing we currently have in Antioch. If we lose the auxilia, our defenses are sorely weakened. We cannot take that risk whilst we are still awaiting the arrival of reinforcements."

Caeso shifted at that, hand instinctively rubbing the hilt of his gladius. "Do we anticipate an attack on Antioch?"

"In the immediate?" Laurentinus shook his head. "No. We are too far from the border for such a thing, but if the emperor truly intends to make his capital here, we must be prepared to receive him in force. We must also be able to afford to send men should borders be breached. Should Ardashir make a move, we are one of the closest cities with substantial enough forces to send aid."

"These border reports…" Caeso let the words linger in the air, not wishing to voice them to the world.

"Not close enough to be more concerning than necessary," Laurentinus offered. "But we must remain vigilant. You know as well as I how the tides turn. For now, I want your primary concern to be the retention of your auxilia, the calming of your men, and, however taxing it is certain to be, peacekeeping as best you can. We cannot allow the city to gorge upon itself." He looked at them each in turn. "Do not make me regret the allowances I have given, I beg you."

"Yes, sir." Both Will and Caeso echoed the acknowledgement, recognizing that the general was giving them leave. With one final, hesitant look towards their commander, the two men exited the auguraculum and began the long walk back down the hill.

"I don't know what to say," Will admitted softly as they made enough distance between themselves and those who could overhear.

"You should count your blessings," Caeso replied distractedly. A thousand different tactics and plans could be seen running just past the surface of his eyes. Will did not envy him in

that moment. A great deal had just been put on his shoulders. “Be grateful that it is general Laurentinus here and not general Titus.”

“I feel as though this is all my fault.”

Caeso stopped short, bracing his palm on Will’s shoulder and turning the other man to look at him. “And that is ridiculous. Social politics and reactions of war are not a responsibility you can take upon yourself. If I did not know you better, I would claim it arrogance that makes you believe you possess enough importance to impact such a situation.” He smiled and it was a tired and fond thing. “But I know you and I know that you would take on the burdens of the entire world if you could. You must allow yourself to breathe, Will.”

Will gripped Caeso’s forearm loosely in a gesture of comradery and affection. “It has never been particularly easy to allow myself breath.”

“I cannot have both of us falling apart.” Caeso grinned and shook Will lightly. “Who will I turn to if you’ve lost your wits?”

“Lucas is always welcoming to rants.”

A bark of laughter. “You wound me. Sending me off to Lucas as though you’re punishing me.”

Will smiled, but it faded into something sour and despondent. “I’m truly sorry if anything I have done has caused you suffering, Caeso.”

“I believe the general was correct,” the legatus responded after a pause. “Had you not been there with the auxilia last night, things could have ended a lot differently. There is a very high chance that your presence calmed them and reassured of their connection to the legion. Your absence could have led to consequences I would rather not consider.”

“I suppose.”

“Suppose your way into a bed. You look exhausted.”

“So do you.”

Caeso waved away the observation carelessly. “Sleep is a luxury I will have to afford myself another time.” He paused again and bit on his cheek, seemingly hesitating on some words.

“What is it?”

Caeso looked at him and then away again, posture revealing his discomfort. “And of Hannibal? I was told he was wounded.”

“He was. To the bone across the back.”

Caeso looked genuinely displeased by this. “And his recovery?”

“Will be much better than it could have been.” Will ran a hand through his hair, pushing away visions of his nightmare out of his mind—of Hannibal bleeding, dying, disappearing. “I tended to him and I will return later to check his wounds.”

“Do you doubt the auxilia medics?”

Will grimaced and stared at the ground.

Caeso grunted and chose not to comment. “Well, please relay the results of our discussion with Laurentinus to him. He will need to know where the legion stands and that our support has not wavered.”

“I’m sure he will take the news very well.”

“I hope so,” Caeso muttered. “Few others will.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, there will be an overdose of Hannibal in the next chapter, I promise.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

"The only simplicity is to be found on the battlefield. It is the moments of calm that should be regarded with distrust in war."

When Will was a boy he had been impossible. "An unrelenting little rebel," his father would call him, voice always laden with pride.

His father was a mere farmer. He had little coin to his name and therefore could not afford to provide Will with any formal level of education, but where his father lacked coin, he possessed many friends. Will had asked him once how he had come to meet such a strange variation of individuals. His father had given him the vague and avoidant reply that he had traveled a great deal in his youth, for reasons that were both unimportant and uninteresting. Will had never quite believed him, but never found the heart to press.

One such friend of his father's was an old scholar by the name of Laelius. Laelius was a gruff and blunt man who tutored Will in return for food from their farm. Will, in all his childish wisdom, made every effort to make his tutelage nigh impossible.

Hot summer days would find him hiding away in Laelius' meager stables, nose in a book and ears deaf to the world. On those days, Laelius would fling the book at Will's head, ignoring the boy's cries about the delicacy of the object, and force him to speak lines of Latin for the next five hours straight as punishment.

When the weather chilled and the land froze over, the freeze of the air would goad Will indoors. There, he would curl himself up by the fire whenever Laelius turned his back, nose once more in one of the books he had snuck from his father's collection. On those days, Laelius would sigh, too cold to be severe, and simple throw small bobbles across the room periodically until Will got fed up with being pummeled and finally agreed to study.

Will had been damn near recalcitrant, resenting Laelius for his persistence and blinded to the man's patience until he had been dead and gone for many years.

Will had never understood as a boy how lucky he was to have those books or Laelius at his disposal. Wealth was a concept meant for those who had it. It wasn't until he was older that he truly understood the value of what his father had given him. A farmer with possession of such texts was not only uncommon but nearly impossible to find. As an adult, Will found himself wishing he had pushed a little harder—asked with more intent—upon the topic of his father's travels, but one terrible winter had claimed the man who had been so strong in his convictions of the value of knowledge that Will would forever be lacking of the one knowledge he truly desired to possess.

Who was his father?

Surely he could not have always been a farmer. Men born to the land lived by it until their age took them. They were unconcerned with the world, with learning, with language, with all the things that Will's father held so dear.

Over his life, Will had read and listened to many stories. He had traveled the seas with Odysseus through the weary text of his books and lived tremendous lives through the tales of those he had encountered in his travels. But the story that he would never hear was the tale of the man whose mystery had defined him. Without his father's books, his encouragement, and his insistence that he return to Laelius day after day, Will would have never taken to medicine. He would never have become a medicus. He would never have experienced life in the way it had found him.

Without his father, Will likely would have become a servant to some noble, content to live out his days in mediocrity with no curiosity about the world.

It seemed a cruel fate that Will would never discover the reasons for his father's passions towards such things; his willingness to love the world in all its enigmatic obscurity. He had wondered, as time passed, why his father had been so averse to regaling him with tales of his wayward past. For a man eager to raise his son to be inquisitive and resourceful, he was surprisingly loath to open the door to his own history. In the end, Will had come to the conclusion that the past must have been painful, somehow.

Perhaps it had all come down to his mother. Her death had never fully settled on his father's shoulders, looming over the man and draining his light like an ever-present shadow. Sometimes, Will wondered if it was heartbreak and not illness that had claimed his father's life in the end.

He couldn't imagine loving someone so much that their death could be so utterly destroying.

Caeso had suggested once, huddled in a tent on a cold night in their early days in the legion, that Will could return home after his service and ask after his father. Perchance someone would still be there who had known him. Maybe, just maybe, someone would have answers for him.

Will had shaken the suggestion off after a thought. If his father hadn't wanted him to know, who was he to pry the truth from a dead man's fingers?

Some things, he decided, were better left to fade.

He told himself it was him being respectful of his father's wishes. In truth, he was simply afraid of what he would find.

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Will was back at the auxilia appointments faster than he would have admitted to. His pride wanted to argue that he should visit his own barracks first—tell his friends of everything that

had happen in the past day—but his feet had decided that such conversation was not a necessity and they had carried him straight back to Hannibal's doorstep.

Ironically enough, despite his traitorous feet and their desire to walk him right back into the chaos, his return to Hannibal was postponed. No sooner had he walked up to the building than Firuz, the young soldier from the day prior, had sought him out.

"You helped our captain, yes?" he asked. His eyes were nervous and hopeful and Will paused, frowning. "You're a healer of some kind?"

"Yes on both counts," Will said hesitantly. "Is someone injured?"

The unassuming nature of Firuz made him uncomfortable, somehow. The man was a soldier, yet he seemed more suited to the trade of a farmer or a craftsman—a life of calm and quiet and steady work—rather than the chaotic havoc war tended to bring. He shook away the thoughts. It wasn't kind of him to judge Firuz in that way. The man was still alive, after all, and Hannibal likely didn't recruit those who were any less than capable.

Firuz sighed and scratched the back of his neck. "Not in so many words," he admitted. "But I'm concerned."

Perplexed, Will looked past the younger man's shoulders. No one was in sight. "I don't understand."

"You remember my brother, yes?"

The grumpy older brother from the inn. He had been silent and brooding and slightly intimidating. Will believed he remembered his name to be Jalu… Jola… no, Jalil. That was it. He winced hesitantly. "I recall."

Firuz grimaced and scratched his neck again. He looked remorseful and abashed. "I know it's none of your concern, but he has been acting oddly for a few days. I believe he is ill and refusing to tell me."

Almost reflexively, the medicine in Will's mind kicked into focus. "The illness of pride, no doubt. What are his symptoms?"

"He has withdrawn, refuses to eat much, grips his stomach when he thinks I am distracted." Firuz had the expression of a man that felt he was revealing his brother's deepest and darkest secrets, looking at the ground in discomfort and speaking lowly. "I would ask you to look at him, but I know he would not allow it."

"It makes it difficult for me to ascertain his condition if I cannot see him."

"I know. Do you have a brother? Surely you know how stubborn they can be."

Will smiled. "I have men I consider brothers and I do understand the nature of stubbornness." He sighed, fingers shifting over his satchel in thought. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

“I believe he might be dispelling a great deal of what little food he consumes.”

“You suspect his stomach to be the cause?”

“I think so. I’m wise enough to admit I am not certain.”

Will bit his cheek and thought. “I can get you some glukoriza. It’s a root, of sorts. Boil it in some water and have him drink it. It will sooth discomfort in his stomach, if that is indeed the source of his distress. I’ll bring you some tomorrow, if you like.”

Firuz heaved a sigh of relief and nodded gratefully. “Bahadur was right to send me to you.”

“Bahadur?” Will blinked. “He did?”

The young Persian chuckled awkwardly. “Of course he did. You are a medic, aren’t you? And you’re…” Firuz bit his lip and looked down at his feet again. Will was once more struck will how oddly ill-suited the man seemed to be for his post. “You saved the captain.”

Will frowned and rubbed at his nose. He didn’t like the feeling of being elevated. He didn’t like how unworthy it made him feel. “I did very little, in truth.”

“Then your truth is very different from my own.”

All Will could do was shrug in response, gripping his arms. He knew he was being impolite, but he couldn’t force away the unwelcome discomfort in his guts. “You hold me in a higher regard than I’ve earned. Any medic would have done the same.”

A snort. “Most medics would not gut a man for harming a soldier.”

Will felt the color drop from his face and he turned away. Firuz seemed to realize his mistake and he balked, stepping back.

“I intended that to be complimentary—“

“I know.” Will waved a hand gently through the air, smiling weakly. “I do. I know. My exhaustion is getting the better of me.”

Firuz chewed on his lip and shifted back and forth on his feet, unsure of himself. “Bahadur instructed that we leave a room available to you.”

Will’s eyebrows furrowed. “I’m not of the auxilia. I do not warrant appointments in your barracks.”

“And yet you’ve earned the appointments nonetheless.” Bahadur had piped up from the sidelines, leaning in the doorway of a storage room and watching the two passively. Firuz seemed to take that as inspiration for departure and nodded in a half jerk to Will before scampering off into the building. Bahadur watched his retreat with amusement before settling his steady gaze on Will. “You return unshackled from your reprimand and yet you look as though you’ve had a death sentence.” He frowned and paused as though his own words just dawned on him. “That is, I trust you have not—“

“No!” Will raised his hands quickly, waving away the idea. “No, no sentence of any sort. The general himself requested an audience with me and it did not go as expected. I am in no immediate trouble, it seems.”

Surprisingly, the news seemed to settle unpleasantly onto Bahadur’s shoulders. The other man frowned even deeper and narrowed his eyes. “The general spoke with you directly on the matter?”

Will hesitated. The suspicion rolling off of Bahadur’s expression was unexpected, to say the least. “I… yes. This vexes you?”

The Persian chewed on his words for a moment, gesturing for Will to follow him into the barracks. “My concerns may be entirely unwarranted. Be that as it may, you may wish to explain the details of the situation to Hannibal. He may have a better understanding of the circumstances than I can hope to.”

They had walked to the stairway leading up to the living quarters and Will shuffled anxiously on his feet. “I don’t understand.”

Bahadur had an apologetic look on his face and he patted Will’s shoulder gently. “I’m nowhere near as well versed in politics as our commander. Heed my advice. Discuss the matter with him.”

Will nodded, saying nothing. He had fully intended to tell Hannibal what had happened with Laurentinus, but Bahadur’s cryptic words had served to settle a lump of discomfort in his gut that was quickly eating away at him. The other man was behaving as though Will’s lucky escape from consequence was anything but lucky and Will wasn’t entirely certain he wanted such a worry to be lent credence.

When neither of them seemed to find any further words for one another, Bahadur simply patted Will on the shoulder once more and walked away, leaving the Roman to his own devices. Will hesitated, briefly, before steeling himself and climbing the stairs to Hannibal’s room. Now that the chaos had died down and the auxilia’s station in Antioch had been protected, this would be the first time that he and Hannibal would have a moment to simply sit and talk.

The back of his mind was idly whispering something about tempting fate with optimism, but he resignedly pushed the thoughts away and rapped his knuckles lightly on Hannibal’s door.

“Come in,” came the muffled voice of the commander through the wood and Will chewed his lip and pushed the door open before he could allow himself to become an anxiety-ridden mess in the hallway.

Hannibal was sitting upright in the bed with his back against the wall and bandages dull and dreary around his chest. His face brightened when he saw the young man in his doorway. “Will!”

Will flushed at the enthusiasm and shut the door behind him. “That position doesn’t hurt you?”

Hannibal's brows furrowed for a moment before he understood what Will meant. "I'm propped by my lower back." He leaned forward slightly, a slight hiss of discomfort creeping out from his lips, and gestured to the pillow at the base of his spine. "But your stitch work was very solid, Will. I've no doubt I will head to a swift recovery."

Will shook his head as though shaking the praise from his ears. After a moment of wondering if he was being too bold, he sat down on the side of the bed and turned to look at the dark man beside him. He opened his mouth only to shut it again. He found he had nothing to say.

Being in Hannibal's presence, however, was a calming thing. Immediately, the unrelenting stress of the day began to unwind itself from Will's muscles and he allowed himself to sink more comfortably where he sat, slumping over.

Hannibal looked pleased by the relaxed posture and smiled at him. "I see you have evaded punishment." At the sudden downward curve of Will's lips, his smile fell. "Or perhaps that is not the case."

"I'm beginning to wonder that myself," Will admitted. He chuckled humorlessly and rubbed the back of his head. "I told Bahadur that I was released from such responsibilities and he seemed to take this as bad tidings."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed much in the way Bahadur's had previously and this time Will recognized the look. Calculation. "What precisely did you tell him to warrant such a response?"

"I told him that the general spoke with me and he ab—"

"The general spoke with you?"

Will sputtered, unused to Hannibal interrupting him. "Bahadur asked me the same. Why is this a bad thing?"

Hannibal leaned forward, ignoring he pain along his shoulders, and reached forward to place his hand atop Will's. With as serious a face as he had ever donned, he stared the younger man straight in the eyes. "Will, tell me everything."

There was something about the request—something so entirely ephemeral and foreboding—that had Will stiffening and feeling the anxiety begin to creep back into his skin. "Hannibal, what's wrong? I feel like I've missed something incredibly important."

Hannibal's hand flexed over Will's own in a gesture of comfort. "Please, Will. Trust me. I need to know what was said to you."

With a steadying breath, Will nodded and began to explain the events of the morning. He spoke of the odd request for Caeso to bring Will directly to the legatus augusti up at the auguraculum. He told Hannibal how Laurentinus had said that giving in to the demands of the citizens of Antioch by expelling the auxilia would only embolden their fears and establish a panic. He talked about Laurentinus' bizarrely understanding perspective of Will's friendship with the auxilia and how he had all but ordered that Will continue his association

to the mercenaries in order to maintain their loyalty and connection to the Roman empire. With the slightest hesitation, he added how Caeso had been warned to reign in the concerns of his men and prove his leadership.

When it was all said and done, Will was leaning into Hannibal's upright knees and staring distantly out the window, his words a monotonous muttering as he recited the tale.

Hannibal had stayed impressively silent throughout, listening and nodding periodically and stroking warm fingers over the back of Will's hand.

"And that's all that happened, really. I came straight here afterwards." Will caught himself and bit his lip, ducking his head at the admission. The words had flown out of his mouth thoughtlessly. What was he thinking—admitting so readily that his first impulse had been to rush straight back into Hannibal's arms? He felt his face flush.

Hannibal gracefully let the words pass unacknowledged, saving Will from sinking further into his embarrassment. "And Caeso seemed pleased with the result of this meeting?"

Will frowned and thought on it. "Now that I look back, he wasn't particularly pleased, no. He seemed hesitant, if anything." He pictured Caeso's withdrawn expression in his mind, searching for a fitting word. "Cautious."

Hannibal nodded and said nothing, gazing stoically towards the window.

Will felt his concern mounting by the second. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. That much was clear. "Hannibal, *please*." He knew his tone had fallen into the depths of begging, but he was tired and anxious and confused. He wanted a day of peace and it seemed such a day was not to come any time soon.

Hannibal's gaze softened and he took pity on Will's apprehension. "Forgive me." He smiled gently. "Even I need to gather my thoughts on occasion."

Will bowed his head and kept his mouth shut. He didn't want to pressure the other man into speaking. He needed to learn to better school his patience—an issue he had not considered he would need to face in the past. "I understand."

Slim fingers prodded under Will's chin and turned him to face the man beside him.

"Will, your demands for information are not unwarranted." Hannibal sighed and let his hand fall back down on top of Will's. "I simply struggle with how to explain to you why what you have told me is concerning."

"I've never known you to struggle to explain anything."

"You'll see repeat occurrences as time passes, I assure you."

Will smiled, but it was weak and unsure. He looked away again.

There was a stretch of silence before Hannibal spoke again. "I understand how it may seem as though you have escaped the sting of the blade, so to speak."

Will felt the acid roil in his stomach. “But I haven’t. That’s what you’re saying.”

“I am uncertain,” Hannibal replied truthfully. His thumb was idly stroking over Will’s knuckles, an action that seemed equally as grounding for him as it was for the young Roman seated on his bed. “I do know that there is more to Laurentinus’ intentions than he revealed to you. Caeso’s wariness upon your departure is indicative of him being aware of this.”

A stab that felt like betrayal wedged in between Will’s ribs and he grimaced. “Then why didn’t he tell me? Does he distrust me so?”

“He was likely trying to spare you the concern as there is little you can do regardless of what the true circumstance may be.” Hannibal squeezed the hand beneath his own. “You are a man who takes it upon himself to suffer over things you cannot control. No doubt he sees this.”

“I’m tiring of people echoing one another to me,” Will muttered. He rubbed his brow and hissed when he accidentally caught the gash upon it. “Caeso said the same to me earlier today. Am I so transparently tremulous in my resolve?”

“Your resolve is not in question.”

“Then what is?”

Hannibal paused. Taking in a shallow breath and stroking his thumb over knuckles again, he spoke. “Your capacity to take on responsibilities that are not yours to bear.”

Will frowned and stared at his knees.

Recognizing that he wasn’t going to receive a response, Hannibal continued onward. “Nevertheless, you deserve an explanation, but please understand that anything I have to say is entirely speculation—based on experience, certainly—but speculation nonetheless.”

“I understand.”

“Very well.” Hannibal removed his grip on Will’s hand and adjusted himself as though preparing for an arduous speech. Perhaps he was. Will turned to look at him in respect for the seriousness of the conversation. After an inordinate length of thought, the silence broke. “No doubt Bahadur felt the same doubt as I when you informed him that the general requested your presence. Despite the seriousness of what happened yesterday, the situation is a relatively simple one in regards to your *punishment*.” Hannibal’s lips curled and twitched at the word, tasting the displeasure he felt at the idea that Will should be punished at all.

With a sigh, he continued. “You killed a commoner, but it was a single individual in a situation of blatant animosity. Your punishment should have been determined by your legatus. By Caeso. There was no need for it to be elevated to your general as he has far more pressing concerns than what amounts to a brawl that took turns.”

“I thought much the same,” Will said. He leaned further into Hannibal’s knees, hoping his weight wasn’t hindering the other man’s back. He received no such complaint. “But I thought

that perhaps the political implications of the event were what warranted the unusual intervention."

"An understandable assumption and partially true, in any respect," Hannibal agreed. "But things are never so simple in times of war. The only simplicity is to be found on the battlefield. It is the moments of calm that should be regarded with distrust in war."

"You suspect a plot?"

"A strong word." Hannibal pressed his lips together and mulled over his thoughts. "Which may or may not be accurate. As I said, this is speculation, but from my experience there is never a time when a man of such a command as Laurentinus would have the desire to seek the conversation of a simple soldier after what is, quite honestly, not an uncommon ordeal in these times. This situation of civil unrest was not the first and it will not be the last. Events like these are not only anticipated, but expected."

"Laurentinus did say that Emperor Severus intends to come here," Will offered, trying to follow Hannibal's leaping trains of thought. "Might this increase the severity of an otherwise not unusual situation?"

Hannibal frowned and Will decided the expression didn't suit him. "It is very likely. It's no secret that the emperor has questionable military expertise. His need for constant and undeniably failed attempts at diplomacy have caused resounding issues. There is a crisis of communication." He hesitated, the pause of an officer determining what information was pertinent to reveal to a foot-soldier.

In the end, his connection to Will seemed to override conduct. "The legions are in disarray. As the commander of the auxilia I have been privy to the discussions of your officers. The information is disarming, to say the least. Severus' marked refusal to heed military advice has cost us dearly. His attempts to bribe Ardashir away from war have been laughable and merely prompted Ardashir to push harder at what he sees as an empire led by a weak leader."

Will bit his lip and nodded. These were things he had suspected, but his knowledge was gathered in fragments of overheard conversations, slips of tongue, and the occasional rumor.

"Because he refuses to seek military cohesion and strategy, the cohorts are receiving no direct orders from the capital," Hannibal continued. "Wartime decisions already bear the burden of haste and desperation. In combination with the lack of instruction from the capital and the increasingly ardent disagreements between Roman leaders on how to proceed—"

"Our army is weak," Will finished.

Hannibal hummed. "Yes. More so than many realize."

"For good reason. If the public or even the soldiers were aware of the level of discord, faith would be lost and there would be mass desertion. There would be rebellion."

"There is…" Hannibal trailed off in an uncharacteristic moment of hesitation, turning his gaze from Will. "There is a possibility, however slight, that the reason Laurentinus wishes to

maintain the loyalty of the auxilia is because the rumors of military failures are becoming less than rumor. There is danger of revolt should the word spread too quickly and too convincingly."

Will furrowed his brows and shook his head. He didn't understand. Surely there was nothing the auxilia would be able to do if the public revolted or soldiers deserted.

Upon seeing Will's perplexed moue, Hannibal closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "There is far less likelihood of issue, in Laurentinus' mind, should the need arise to ask non-Roman soldiers to step into the role of peacekeepers. Legionaries could take issue with fighting their countrymen."

Will's throat was thick with strain. "You can't truly believe that he means to utilize the auxilia as riot control. As mercenaries."

"That, or—" Hannibal made a displeased sound and rubbed between his eyes. "Or to hunt down deserters, yes. The arrival of emperor Severus will only bring closer to light his incompetence in military method. Antioch will ultimately be one of the foremost appointed hubs close to the border. There will be a surplus of soldiers here upon his arrival. Should there be discontent, asking men to subdue their brothers en masse will not be an easy task."

"He wishes to utilize your foreign blood with an expectation you harbor a stronger loyalty to coin than the army for which you fight." Will's words were breathless and slight. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was no man of politics. He was a healer, a reader, a friend. He was no diplomat or officer. The idea that the auxilia could be retained with the implication of such dark necessities was something he couldn't begin to comprehend. "What type of man would make such a consideration?"

"A leader," Hannibal replied simply. "It may not be a compassionate consideration, dear Will, but it is certainly a prudent one. Should treason begin to whisper on the lips of men, alternatives must be at Laurentinus' disposal. It is likely that my men are one such alternative."

Will scowled. "But what does that have to do with me?" In a fit of pique, he stood from the bed and began pacing the room, ignoring the imploring looks Hannibal sent his way. He threw his hands into the air as he spoke, gesticulating wildly. "I can understand what you're saying. I may not like it, but I understand it. What I cannot possibly comprehend is my role in this. Surely there are other ways to ensure the auxilia's retention other than *me*! I'm a nameless soldier to him. I'm a face in a crowd of many. For a man making such wise choices, entrusting the delicacy of such a plan to a subordinate seems foolish."

"Were he entrusting the plan to you, he would have *told* you the plan," Hannibal responded gently, the low tone of his voice a soothing balm on the harshness of the words. "I cannot claim to have every answer for you, Will. It is possible he recognizes we would find coin to placate the results of what happened yesterday insulting and he is utilizing the other means he feels might serve as a more benign reminder of our place in the cohort."

"A gentler reminder." Will snorted and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "Me."

“You are certainly less heavy-handed than a satchel of coin.” Hannibal fixed the younger man with a decidedly fond smile. “You think too little of your role in this, Will. You may be but an ant on the hill to him, but a good leader recognizes that every ant has a role to play. Ants, as tiny and infinitesimal as they are, are remarkably strong and resourceful creatures. Have you ever watched an ant carry an entire leaf upon its back? It must be the weight of the world to such a tiny thing. Nevertheless, it succeeds.”

“But there are a thousand more to take its place should it fail.”

Hannibal shook his head. “You are not among the plethora of the faceless. I know you may not have wished it, and perhaps I am partially to blame for the circumstance, but your involvement with the auxilia has undoubtedly caused many to notice you as an individual. All it takes is a particular person recognizing you as a man with an identity and your value alters its state.”

“And that man is Laurentinus.”

“Yes.” Hannibal grunted and tried to shift before waving Will over. “Come, help me for a moment.”

Will hurried back to the bedside and helped Hannibal resettle himself, taking a moment to peel back the edge of the bandages and examine the wound. “I see that one of your medics replaced the wrappings this morning, but I should like to do so again myself soon.”

A dry chuckle. “As you wish, though it is entirely unnecessary.”

Will pursed his lips and sat back down on the bed when Hannibal was finally sorted. “It is necessary. I don’t wish an argument.”

“You’ll have none,” Hannibal reassured him, giving Will a look that sent pleasant shivers down his spine. “And I promise not to tell my medics that you doubt their expertise.”

Will blanched and his eyebrows shot to his hairline. “I never!”

Hannibal laughed, cut distressingly short by a sharp slice of pain, and shook his head. “As much as I enjoy the amusement, perhaps we best refrain.”

“By all means, as it was at my expense,” Will huffed, settling Hannibal back against the pillows and retaking his seat.

Hannibal watched him carefully for a moment, ascertaining whether or not he had actually offended the young man. He settled on tacit humor rather than worry in the end and reached out to take Will’s hand in his own.

Will found himself blushing, the flush of his face creeping up as though completely ignorant to the fact that the man had been nearly devouring him whole up against a wall not so long ago. Holding his hand was nothing compared to that, yet it seemed so much more deliberate and intimate. Will pushed the ridiculousness of the conundrum from his thoughts and turned

his palm up towards questing fingers, inspecting the offending hand as though it were something fascinating and mysterious.

“What vexes you?”

Will made a sound low in his throat and continued to scrutinize the hand in his grasp—tried to glean all the answers he sought from sword callouses and olive skin. “I’m not vexed.”

Hannibal grunted, but said nothing. It was as dubious a sound as any.

Will sighed and allowed himself a moment more of introspection, letting Hannibal’s hand be the focus of his attentions. He ran a thumb over each knuckle in turn, over the pads of his fingers, over the veins leading to his wrist. Hannibal offered no complaint. Eventually, Will took a breath and let the words flow in whichever direction they decided was best. “Is this temporary?”

It was a question he had feared to ask. Part of him assumed that no matter the potency of their allure to one another, the circumstances could not possibly allow for their liaison to continue indefinitely. Their differences were too stark. A canyon of intricate disparities separated them. How could it possibly be expected to last?

“Do you wish it to be so?”

Will’s eyes shot upwards to meet Hannibal’s, stunned by the inquiry. He hadn’t expected such a rebuttal, but he knew it was fair play. “I…” he trailed off and chewed his lip. If he didn’t break himself of that habit soon, he’d chew the cursed thing off. “Should I be practical and say that it would be for the best? A soldier should be practical.” His words sounded hollow even to him.

Hannibal smiled and it was a sympathetic thing. “Answer me as a man, not a soldier.”

And suddenly it felt like that was asking a great deal. Hannibal was imploring Will to toss aside his armor. Were he to do so and be wounded, he wasn’t sure he could recover. Will continued to worry his lip, heedless of how sore it was becoming. He froze when Hannibal’s hand left his own to press fingers into his chin. A warm thumb slowly pulled his lip from his teeth and replaced it, dipping in to tap at the tip of his tongue.

Will could feel the blood throbbing in his temples—a steady staccato beat of interest—and he pressed his tongue against the salty skin. Hannibal used the grip to pull him down by teeth and chin, removing his thumb only when their faces were close enough that he could replace it with his own mouth instead.

Ever-conscious of Hannibal’s wounds, Will leaned over him carefully, muscles shaking with the effort to keep his weight off of the other man as he breathed unsteadily into the kiss, around that tongue, into that taste. It was deep and wanting, stubbed out by the restraint made necessary with injury. For the briefest moment, Will moaned into the kiss and Hannibal’s hand found its way to tightly knit into Will’s hair and pull him closer.

Will’s arms quivered and he pulled back with regret. “I’m going to fall on you.”

Hannibal's smirk was lazy and lustful. "Surely you've more strength than that."

"Not when you kiss me." Will breathed out a soft and airy laugh to try and lighten the statement, but if the darkening of Hannibal's eyes was any indication, he hadn't done very well at hiding his own desire.

"I suppose I'll need to keep that in mind when I kiss you, then," Hannibal replied, letting his hand slide out of Will's hair so the younger man could sit back fully. "Do you want this to be temporary?"

Will shut his eyes and focused on steadying his breathing. Hannibal wasn't going to let this drop, but it wasn't as though he should. Will had been the one to bring the subject up to begin with. "Not in the slightest."

"Excellent. Neither do I."

Will don't know why he felt so surprised at the determination in those words. Perhaps despite all the platitudes and sentiments Hannibal had sent his way, Will hadn't entirely expected him to be so steadfast and resolute in his interest. Perhaps, though, that was simply self-deprecation. "Well," he licked his lips. "Good, then." His eyes flickered to Hannibal and then out towards the dusty light of the window. "That's good."

"I hesitate to ask, but you still seem vexed."

"Not precisely." Will rolled his shoulders in some facsimile of a shrug. "There's a great deal to consider on all fronts. Not simply in regards to us."

Hannibal's face became grim and Will hated that he was the one to put that expression there. "Indeed there is. Laurentinus' intentions are one of a myriad of concerns, though not as pressing as others."

Will raised a curious eyebrow in his direction. "If you don't mind my asking, what is most pressing for you?"

"At the moment, the station of my men. They are my most significant responsibility. I fear for their safety and their sanity."

Will felt the nervous edge of military convention clawing at the back of his skull. Despite one of his best friends being a legatus, he knew his place and always felt the nag of discipline nipping at his heels whenever a superior spoke to him so candidly of matters. It was a habit that was difficult to break; for good reason. If he was to be caught in the knowledge he possessed thanks to the loquacious nature of his allies, it could be seen as treasonous insubordination in and of itself.

Hannibal must have seen something in his expression because he spoke out against it. "Do you not wish to speak of this? I see anxiety roiling within you whenever we discuss these matters. I apologize if—"

“No, no.” Will waved his hand, ignoring the rudeness of interruption in favor of cutting off Hannibal’s guilt at the root. “You, Caeso, and even Valerian all seem to forget that I am of lesser standing. I could not begin to describe my appreciation at the trust that all of you have given me, but it does not allay my fear of repercussion should these conversations come to light. This is relevant both in reference to myself and all of you. I would be a lowly foot soldier with too much knowledge for his own good, but all of you are officers. You could lose your standing for being so candid.”

“You are no lowly foot soldier,” Hannibal countered readily. “You are a specialist.”

“And now you sound naïve where I know you are not,” Will responded, not unkindly. “I’m no officer.”

Hannibal considered this for a moment. “What precisely is your rank, Will? I admit that the complexities of your rankings still escape me despite all of these years I’ve spent within your borders.”

“Ah.” Will searched for the words to best explain his position. In all fairness, Hannibal was correct. The system was complex, to say the least. “I am a medicus immunes. Orion, the one who trained me, is medicus cohorti. He is the lead medical officer of the entire cohort, though he’s currently with our century until the rest of the cohort makes their way to Antioch. He is the officer, not me. His rank, I suppose you could say, is equivalent to that of a centurion. Me, I’m simply a legionary exempt of particular duties because I can wrap a bandage.”

“You can’t possibly be the only medics in your cohort.”

Will laughed. “Oh no, not at all. Orion and I are simply the most experienced, hence being place with the forward century. There are plenty of discerns capsariorum—that is, those being trained for the role—but I suppose we are one less now.” His laugh turned abruptly into a frown and he stared at the floor.

“The young man who fell from the cliff. He was a discerns, was he not?” Hannibal asked. At Will’s hesitant nod, he continued. “You told me quite defiantly that night that you are no mere legionary, yet now you balk at the prospect of being considered more. What has caused this hesitance?”

Will didn’t have an answer for that. In all likelihood, it was the consternation of everything that had happened with Laurentinus that had made him wary of his own standing. It had been a shock to his system to realize that there was still so much he didn’t understand—still so much out of his control. “Recent events have made me cautious.”

“They have made you unsettled. Your footing has been taking away from you and now you are retreating to the safety of rank. If you are of no import, then nothing you do from this point forward can hold any weight.”

Will winced as though stung by the words. “So, what, I’m avoiding taking responsibility for my own actions?”

“You fear the responsibility you will be required to take, perhaps.” Hannibal’s face gentled. “That is not meant to be an insult, Will. It’s a human fear. Failing is never something one wants to do, especially if that failure could impact those around you.”

“My argument remains. I am no officer.”

“As does mine. You are no mere legionary. If Orion falls or retires from his post, what will become of you?”

Will froze as the implication sunk into his bones. “Orion has no intention of retiring and he is no combat medic. It is unlikely he will fall.”

“That is not what I asked.”

Will scowled, resenting that this admittance was being forced from him but knowing it was an admittance he had to make all the same. “I would take his place as I am his second in command.”

Hannibal nodded, countenance showing no trace of arrogance or victory. “And you would be at the rank of centurion.”

Will’s scowl deepened and he glared at the floor. “Yes, but I don’t see what this matters. This is hypothetical as Orion is not leaving.”

“Bahadur is my second in command. This places him at importance.”

“Bahadur is an officer.”

Hannibal heaved a heavy breath and rubbed between his eyes. Will knew he was being difficult, but he couldn’t find it in himself to back down. Why was Hannibal so intent on establishing his importance? What did it matter? Will could impact no significant change. He was a medic, a healer, a soldier. He was no politician or leader. Even if Orion was to die and leave the post to him, that wouldn’t change. Will didn’t have it in him to lead or be the harbinger of change. He was simply… Will.

Only Hannibal didn’t see Will in such a light, did he? He saw Will as more. He saw him as potential. The only question was *why*.

“Are you trying to elevate my importance to justify your interest?” The words spilled out of Will’s mouth before he could stop them, but he was feeling the boiling steam of frustration and exhaustion and fear and it was beginning to turn inside him.

The shock in Hannibal’s eyes could not be feigned. He looked appalled at the mere suggestion. “Absolutely not!”

“Then why?” Will’s body was tense and coiled. He stood from the bed to loosen his limbs and stop his irritation from snapping him in two. “What does it matter what my rank is? I am a medic regardless of rank. I will never be legatus. I will never command armies. The best I can hope to do is save a man from losing life and limb, if I get to him quickly enough. You have infinitely more power than I!”

Hannibal appeared as though he wished to rise and go to Will, but the vicious wound on his back prevented him from doing so. He settled for reaching a calming hand in his direction, trying to sooth the irate Roman by his presence alone. “Will, please.”

“No!” Will snapped. He was lost in his own doubts, bleeding them into the room like a toxin. “You are the commander of an entire auxilia! You are of import and rank. You have the power to influence change, not me. I can’t be that. I can’t be—“ He took a stuttering breath and ran a hand through his hair. “What does everyone want from me? I’m just a man. I don’t want to be involved in all of this. I wish Laurentinus had never called me. I wish you had never explained to me your concerns.”

“You wish to remain in ignorance until you are blindsided?”

“I—no!” Will bit out a sound of discontent and settled down on the floor beside the bed, back against the wall and head on his knees. “I don’t understand what’s going on, Hannibal,” he moaned. “I feel as though something profound is going to happen and I will have no idea what to do. I have this overwhelming image that everyone will be looking to me, somehow, and I don’t know why or what I’m supposed to do.”

“Everyone won’t be looking to you. This is not all resting on your shoulders.”

“But a portion of it is.”

A moment of hesitance. “Most likely, yes.”

“But why?” Will’s voice was a pathetic, hoarse croak. He felt like a child begging a parent for understanding. He felt tiny and so incredibly foolish. “I killed some noble. I didn’t slaughter an army. I didn’t murder an officer.”

“You made yourself known. Sometimes that’s all it need take.”

Will turned tired eyes up towards Hannibal. They felt dry and red. “Is there a chance you’re wrong? Is there a chance that there will be no rebellion and you won’t be used and Laurentinus won’t ask anything more of me? Is there a chance he will forget I exist?”

Hannibal frowned, chewing slowly over his words. “There is a chance,” he said haltingly. “Yes.”

Will closed his eyes and let his head thud back against the wall. Somehow, he wasn’t convinced.

The silence dragged on for the longest stretch after that. Will had the feeling Hannibal was giving him space to let him calm down. As his anger faded, embarrassment began to curve its way into his belly. He had acted childish. Just as the humiliation was beginning to spin into dizziness, Hannibal’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Come to bed.”

Will blinked. “What?”

Hannibal was looking down at him calmly, a small smile ticking the corner of his lips. “I doubt you achieved anything more than fitful sleep last night. You need rest.”

Will continued to blink like a buffoon. “Bahadur did tell me you had a room for me.”

If there was a way a man could roll his eyes without actually doing so, it seemed Hannibal had mastered the skill. “You are welcome to it if you must, but I’d prefer you come to bed.”

Will was rooted to the floor.

A light, amused sigh. “To sleep, dear Will. I’m not in the condition to do much else, as you well know. I assure you the offer is almost entirely innocent.”

Red colored Will’s cheeks and he grinned in spite of himself. “Almost?”

Hannibal returned the grin. “I can’t neglect the possibility that my hands may wander. I can try to school them into better behavior, but I’m afraid they have a mind of their own.”

Will suddenly felt giddy from the teasing. His mind was swirling and groggy from the amount of emotions he had managed to experience in one day. Hannibal was right. He was exhausted. He laughed weakly. “That sounds dangerous.”

“As I said, you are welcome to the other room. Or to tie my hands if it brings you a level of comfort.”

Will’s face went from flushed to crimson in an instant.

Hannibal’s smile sharpened. “I see. Another thing I’ll need to remember, then. Come to bed.”

Pushing himself up on weary legs, Will slogged over to the other side of the bed, untying his armor as he went. He laid everything in a pile on a stool near the corner of the room, only realizing then how easily he had stripped into nothing but his tunic and shorts without a second glance. Hannibal was watching him idly from the bed, eyes just dark enough to show he was reigning back his interest with great effort.

Will couldn’t help but bite back with a tease of his own. “How obedient are those hands of yours being?”

Hannibal’s eyes sparked with mirth and something far more primal. “As obedient as you need them to be.”

Face falling into seriousness briefly, Will walked over to the bed and slid under the covers. “I need you to take care of your wound.” He rolled onto his side and helped Hannibal settle onto his back. “Does that put too much pressure on it?”

Hannibal grimaced and tried to adjust. “Yes, honestly. Stomach might be best.”

Will admired how readily Hannibal admitted weakness to him. It took a confident soldier to recognize the gravity of injury and not attempt to cover it with pride. Will chose not to

believe that it was simply a display of Hannibal's trust in him. Hannibal was strong. This wasn't just trust. This was Hannibal being what Will admired about him.

He helped the other man roll onto his front and examined the bandages to make sure they weren't too tight. After a moment of hesitation, he let his fingers slide through the silky, dark strands of hair, smiling when Hannibal closed his eyes and hummed at the sensation.

"Save your hands for another day," Will murmured, stroking his fingertips over Hannibal's scalp and feeling oddly powerful as the man relaxed beside him.

"I fully intend to," Hannibal responded half into the pillow, already beginning to slip into sleep.

And when Will felt something strained and painful in his chest, he knew he was done for.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

"You have the power to recognize your own knowledge and turn it to action, which makes you a god among men."

Chapter Notes

Let's pretend it didn't take me 6 months to update this, but I can at least say I think this chapter was worth some wait. Maybe. Guess you'll have to see.

Really, though, you guys are infinitely patient and I love you all for that. Thank you. Here are 10k words to reward your patience.

Despite how restful spending the night in Hannibal's quarters had been, it sadly did not become a habit.

Will knew better than to leave a permanent indent of himself in the other man's bed, even if all they had done was sleep in it. He was a soldier of the legion, not a member of the auxilia, and he didn't need people questioning his already well-noticed liaison with the mercenaries. Spending nights at the auxilia's appointments would raise nothing but questions that no one wanted to answer. He and Hannibal had both agreed to this fact upon waking, Hannibal groggy with healing from his wounds and Will overwhelmed with all that had occurred in the past weeks.

Contrary to his initial expectations, Will did not dissolve of loneliness on the spot. He felt foolish for even considering it a possibility. After all, his friends had not left. They were still waiting for him when he finally returned for the barracks, eyes narrowed in concern and brotherly suspicion as he avoided telling them precisely more than he had to about what had happened with the nobles and with Hannibal.

Caeso wouldn't have told them much, apart from Valerian. In fact, it was Valerian's soothing tones that had quelled the others in their needling of Will.

"Leave the man be," he had said as Lucas was rolling into round six of demanding that Will tell him where he'd been off to for two whole days. "You're not his keeper."

Lucas kicked his heel into the ground from where he was standing over Will and shot a glare in Valerian's direction. "Lucky you, knowing what happened. Not all of us are officers."

Will sighed and continued polishing his greaves. Maybe if he rubbed at the metal hard enough, he could melt into it.

Valerian frowned. “Officer or no, Will has a right to his own business.”

“That business got people killed!” Lucas snapped. He came to a sudden pause in an atypical show of compassion when he saw how Will had stiffened and grimaced. “No doubt in my mind they deserved it, Will. That’s not what—“

“I know.” Will cut him off with a jerk of his head. “I know it’s not.” Heaving a laden sigh, he let his hand still on his greaves and stared at the dirt of the makeshift training grounds they had set up out in the farming fields of the city. “I’ve told you everything that I can, Lucas. Truly, I have.” And he had left out the parts about how he had felt his heart stop and his blood run cold when he thought Hannibal was in danger. He had forgone the tidbits about his discussion with Bahadur and Hannibal on the political implications of his discussion with Laurentinus. He had conveniently avoided the way Laurentinus had threatened Caeso and questioned his leadership abilities.

But these weren’t facts he should be sharing. Not even with his friends. Not until he knew more, understood more, had a grasp on how to handle everything.

Will chewed at his cheek. He hated keeping things from them. “The moment I am able to tell you more, you have my word that I will.” He met Lucas’ gaze to firm up his point—make himself heard.

Miraculously, it worked. All of the fight drained out of Lucas like a slow trickle of sand. After a long moment and a deep breath, the other man nodded and dropped down to sit next to Will on the crates.

“Quit running off like this,” he grumbled, grabbing Will’s greaves haughtily and scrubbing at them himself. “Cimon was so worried about you he started trying to mother me.” They both ignored Cimon’s indignant snort from where he was currently teaching a new legionary how to hold a battering shield. Lucas was scrubbing viciously at the greave in his thick hands. “Your armor is pathetic. It will fall off you in bits if you keep treating it this way.”

Will knew a sign that he was forgiven when he saw it. Lucas was telling him that it was alright, that he would wait, that he would try to understand. Coming from a man so impatient that he had once stormed the kitchen of an inn because their food had taken ten minutes too long, that meant a lot.

“And what of Hannibal?”

The casual question was thrown out by Tertius, who had been idling on the sidelines to stretch out his muscles. He grit his teeth as he extended a leg and leaned to the side. “I was of the idea he had been injured quite severely.”

“If he’d had Helvetia, perhaps that would not be so accurate,” Will murmured with a sigh. “But yes.”

Tertius glanced sideways at the aforementioned shield, pursing his lips. “Had I known she was needed, I would have offered up her assistance without hesitation.”

Will gave a weak, but grateful smile. There was a moment of silence perforated by the sounds of swords clashing and officers shouting training commands. The air smelled of sweat and dirt and the green of the crops carried over by the breeze. “A sword to his back,” he said eventually. “Deep, but mendable.”

“And you mended it, then?” Tertius asked as though it wouldn’t have occurred that anyone else would have been the one to tend to Hannibal.

Will wondered if he was so transparent. He likely was. “I did. But I left further mending to his own medics.”

“Ah, well.” Tertius finished his stretches and cracked his back. “I’ve no doubt you prepared the way splendidly for them. Give Hannibal my regards when you call on him, will you?”

“I hadn’t planned to for a while,” Will admitted, fiddling with the worn leather ties of his bracers.

Tertius shot him a confused look at that, but held his tongue, instead venturing onto the grounds to lend his hand at training. Will watched him go quietly, mind wandering back to that night when Tertius had given his tacit acceptance of his and Hannibal’s relationship. The memory brought discomfort to his gut rather than warmth.

It felt as though everything was balanced on the edge of a knife. One wrong move and the world would turn and throw Will right off its back. He didn’t know precisely where this sudden impulse for caution had come from, but it was gnawing at his heels like something wretched.

He felt, incontrovertibly, that this was the time for resolute restraint; something he hadn’t cared to show until now.

He was tossed out of his thoughts by Lucas heaving his greaves into his lap.

“Put those on,” the stocky man grumbled, getting to his feet. “Time to show me if you learned anything from that Persian’s teachings.”

Rather than argue that Hannibal had only shown him a few basic things—there hadn’t been time for more—Will obediently covered his feet and grabbed a training gladius from the rack.

Maybe letting Lucas knock some of his dignity into the dirt would be a good distraction.

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The sun was waning and the sweltering heat of the afternoon had long since faded by the time the men had given their training a rest. Normally such activities would have been done in increments—dispersed with meal-time and instruction and rest—but there was a vibrating tension in the air among the troops. An impatience was nipping at their heels; a need to *do* something. It had driven them all to exhaustion as they avoided acknowledging the visceral

uncertainty that surrounded them in favor of swinging swords and getting their knees scuffed in the dirt.

Will had been just as eager as the rest of them to forgo thought for physical exertion, but even as he staggered back to the barracks with his companions, muscles tight and sore, he felt a nagging sense that the effort had been wasted.

He looked around at the others. They were sweaty and dirty and laughing and he couldn't help but envy them. Couldn't help but resent himself. Was he really so far gone that he couldn't let his own concerns go for a day? Perhaps his mind was feeble if he was so easily overcome. Or perhaps his friends were the weak ones, so easy to fall into blissful and willful ignorance of their surroundings.

Will grimaced and blinked at his own thoughts. That had been unnecessarily cruel, even in the privacy of his mind. He felt ashamed for even considering such things. These were good men. They didn't deserve to be the target of his own self-doubt.

Rubbing a dusty hand over his face, he followed the others to stock away their equipment and bathe. The public thermae had been opened to the legion, without requiring payment, and the soldiers partook of the access to the baths gladly. Will let the tepid waters of the frigidarium wash away his anxieties, allowing the water to cocoon his naked skin as he swam his thoughts away in the pool. Though the pool was nothing as grand as the ones he'd witnessed in Rome, it was a far sight better than the frigid waters of the rivers they had passed or the scouring salt of the ocean.

The statues lining the room, though chipped and aged, were polished and grand and marvelous to behold. Will let himself float back in the water and admire the muscular chests of stone and the smooth and masculine bellies that reminded him vaguely of Hannibal. Hannibal was as rough as he was smooth. All hard and coiled muscle that seemed to cushion his body restfully, as though waiting for the moment to tense and strike.

"Will!"

Will blinked and swam himself upright, looking over to see Tertius beckoning him at one of the entrances to the caldarium.

"Quit pruning away in the cold bath and join us!"

Will rolled his eyes and allowed a smile, swimming over and walking up the steps. "I've already been to the cella caldaria." An older townsman was looking at his body appreciatively and Will raised an eyebrow at him. The man shrugged and looked away, continuing to rest his feet in the waters.

Tertius snorted and tugged on Will's arm. "Don't leave me alone with a sweaty Lucas and Cimon. I saw you through. You didn't even use the oil."

Will shrugged and, despite his objections, began to follow Tertius back through to the hot baths. "I didn't want the oil."

“After the day we’ve had? You’re mad, friend. The servants here are pleasant. Allow one to tend to you.”

Will just shook his head and let himself be guided into the steam of the room and to the edge of a small pool. Cimon and Lucas were already submerged to their waists, luxuriating in the heat. With a sigh, Will got in and seated himself on a bench. He felt someone nudge his shin with a toe.

It had been Cimon. “You ran off so quickly, Will.”

“You’re not supposed to stay in the caldarium forever, you know,” Will retorted with a teasing grin. “You’ll melt away in here.”

“I rather feel like melting today,” Cimon replied. He stretched his large arms back on the stones and let his head loll. “Nothing is happening. No one is telling us anything. We may as well melt.”

Will found himself nervously glancing around the room. There was still a smattering of legionaries, but no townsfolk to be found here. The servants, however, were always known to have keen ears. “Perhaps disparaging our situation is best left for the barracks.”

Lucas let out some sort of indignant cough and flicked water in Will’s direction. “Lower your hackles, Will.”

Will frowned and rubbed his arms under the water. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be so paranoid.”

“Wouldn’t know. I’ve no idea what’s got you so tortured.” Lucas bit out in a grumble. When he received a sharp glare from Cimon and Tertius both, he raised his hands and sniffed. “Which I’ve already agreed to, of course.”

“Some agreement,” Cimon chided. He turned concerned eyes to Will. “Lucas’ impatience notwithstanding, Will, you know that you have our support and our worries.”

Will met his gaze, guilt clawing at his chest. “I don’t want you to be worried.”

“That is something you cannot prevent, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t know what to tell. I don’t know what I *can* tell.” Will ran a hand through his curls and slumped. “It’s all so terribly skewed and I don’t know what to do.” He started when there was a hand on his shoulder, looking up to meet Tertius’ sympathetic gaze. The other man squeezed once and let his hand fall back into the pool.

“I can’t imagine it was easy,” Tertius said after a moment, chewing over his words. “Meeting with—” He caught himself and glanced at the other soldiers nearby. After a moment, he seemed to decide there was nothing to hide. Will felt another stab of guilt for his paranoia being so contagious. “Laurentinus. I’ve heard he is an intimidating man.”

“I thought you’d met him,” Cimon interjected curiously. His muscles were gleaming with sweat and he dismissively waved away a servant who approached the pool with olive oil for their skin. “I know Valerian has.”

Tertius shook his head. “I’ve not spoken with him directly. Seen him at some distance, merely. He has quite the presence.”

“To put it mildly,” Will agreed under his breath. “I got the sense that he was saying far more than the words he uttered.”

“How’s that work?” Asked Lucas, grimacing as he tried to understand the concept. “A man either says his words or doesn’t.”

“I believe Will is referring to intention,” Tertius offered helpfully.

Will nodded. “His intentions were clouded.” Quickly, he backtracked. “I am not saying that they were of the contemptible sort, by any means. I mean nothing so careless. I simply…” He trailed off and chewed on his lip. Sweat trickled down his chin. “You know when your officer gives you orders without reason?”

“You mean always?” Lucas’ sarcasm was potent.

Will waved him off. “We’ve all been at war long enough to have received those orders that are odd. The ones that seemingly require explanation where none is offered.” The others nodded and Will felt bolstered by their silent agreement. “It was that feeling when I spoke with him. As I told you, he ordered me to maintain my connection with the auxilia. He even offered reasons, but—”

“But you feel as though the reasons were not particularly forthright,” came Tertius’ interjection.

“Or that there was more to them, yes.”

Cimon hummed. “That is all we can expect as soldiers. There is a reason that Laurentinus is Legatus Augusti. He is a general, Will. It is for him to know the extent of his plans and no one else.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” It bothered Will. It bothered him immensely.

“Not particularly, no.” Cimon gave Will a severe look. “But I am a sword. I am a hammer. You, however,” and the severity of his countenance was tempered with a fond smile. “You are a mind and a heart. You always have been, Will. Men like you seek to understand. Men like Laurentinus seek to achieve. Men like me simply seek to survive as the rest of you go about achieving and understanding and creating the world.”

Will felt his eyes burn and he looked away. “I’ve created nothing. I’m no different from you. I’m a soldier of this legion like any other.”

Tertius heaved out a soft breath and said nothing. Lucas was shaking his head. It was Cimon who continued to hold the other end of the discussion above water. “For now, perhaps,” he said. “But I have no doubt in my mind that you are no bystander in this life, Will. You have a mind to you and the passion to use it. You will be one of the men that change history. I can feel it. I can see you standing on the top of the world while the rest of us bash anyone who

would pull you down." He said the last bit with levity and camaraderie, trying to brighten to tone of the conversation.

A single, hot tear found its way down Will's cheek before his could stop it. He ducked his head. The others said nothing of it.

It was Lucas who startled them out of the moment. "Cimon's right, the bastard. You don't belong in war."

Shocked by the statement, Will stared across the pool. "I—"

But Lucas cut him off before he could misinterpret. "You are a good soldier and a better medic. I would trust you with my life, Will." He huffed out a tense breath and shook his head again like he was disagreeing with the world at large. He probably was. "But you're better than us. More."

"Speak for yourself," Tertius sniped out half-heartedly. Will could tell from the look in his eyes that he didn't disagree.

Will laughed, the sound uncomfortable and tight in his chest. "You are the best men I've ever known. I could never claim to be any better than any of you. It would be like swallowing poison from my own tongue."

"Then it's a damned good thing you've never claimed it," Cimon said with a barking laugh. He rose from the pool in a rush of water and muscle and naked skin. "Come. Let's retreat to the cold baths."

Will followed suit and chuckled as Tertius whined behind them. "No oils?"

"Stay for oils if you want them!" Cimon called over his shoulder.

Will looked back to see Tertius trailing them glumly. Facing forward again, he let the others lead him back to the large pool as they began chatting about what they wanted to eat after their cooling. As he looked between them, watched Jove and Valerian join them from the other side of the frigidarium and jump into the conversation, his heart felt so full it cracked with it and spilled.

He loved these men. His friends. His family. The people who he had spent the better part of his life with, cleaned their wounds, clasped their arms, killed by their side. He cherished them dearly. And through this overwhelming surge of love and loyalty he could feel his chest breaking in two and exposing him to the chill of the air outside. He could feel the wind, unseen and unheard, rushing in through the impermeable stones of the bathhouse. It swept through him and hollowed him out with fear and the drowning, overwhelming certainty that they would not all see the end of this war.

He could feel it in the deepest core of himself—a foreboding, cloying darkness that warned him of the future and all its failures and miseries.

Will shut his eyes and let the voices of his friends roll over him and he could hear it in their tones, in their laughter, in their teases. Every last one of them was feeling it too. It was sneaking into their syllables and bleeding into their tones. They sensed it in a way that only experience men of war could.

The coming of death.

And with a sigh that only a man of war could heave, Will let the moment pass, because he knew just as well as the rest of them that there would be nothing he could do to stop it. All he could do was fight when the time came. Claw and chew and slash his way to the surface and hope to catch a breath of air before it was too late. It was all any man could hope in war. To make it out alive.

Cautiously letting acceptance overtake him, Will smiled and joined in on the conversation.

After all, what else could he do?

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It was after another week had passed that the heady sense dread simmering in the city was given something to be up in arms about.

Will had finally planned to revisit the auxilia after days of nothing but training and drinking and avoiding further conversations about the state of limbo they had found themselves stuck in during their stay in the city.

He'd been standing in the market, surrounded by the smell of spices and barely holding back from running his fingers over a bolt of silk that some idiotically brave trader had managed to haul back alive despite the tensions out East. The man had given Will a critical eye, knowing full well no legionary was going to hand over the coin for such a luxury, and Will had taken a wistful step back with his thumbs hooks in the straps of his lorica segmentata. That was the moment he heard it. Shouts and a bell clanging from somewhere near the eastern gates and moments later a handful of city guard were jogging in full march past him, following closely by Caeso, Decimus, and some frazzled looking legionary that Will didn't quite recognize.

"Caeso! What is it? What's happened?" Will asked in a rush, running to catch up to the step of the other man.

Caeso didn't slow his pace but made no effort to rebuff when Will joined him. "Fourth cohort has been spotted on the ridge. It looks as though they have seen battle." His eyes were darting left and right, checking to see that those he had summoned were accounted for. The arrival of the cohort was obviously unplanned.

Will's eyes widened and his step stumbled a bit. "I'll fetch Orion." At Caeso's confirming nod, he was off towards the barracks.

For a cohort to make for a city without any communication beforehand—Will grit his teeth and increased his pace—it was a bad sign. There were any number of reasons they wouldn't

have sent word of their arrival. Perhaps their messengers had been killed. Perhaps their wounds were far too grave to waste time on such thoughts. Perhaps—

"What madness has overtaken the men?" Orion's gruff demand knocked Will clear out of his thoughts and the young legionnaire slid to a stop in the dirt.

Will looked around. Sure enough the men of their cohort were nearly swarming, yammering loudly amongst themselves with theories and gossip of what could be happening. He shook his head and focused on the task at hand. "Medicus needed," he panted out. The run towards the barracks had winded him more than he thought. Orion placed an unexpected steadying hand on his shoulder while he caught his breath.

"Out with it, boy."

Closing his eyes and willing away the adrenaline of unanticipated eventfulness, Will tried again. "The fourth cohort has been spotted on the ridge towards the city." He gestured behind himself, but Orion kept his gaze on Will, listening quietly. "From Caeso's reaction, I have my doubts that this was anticipated. He suspects they have seen battle and it is likely there will be injury that needs tended."

A young soldier hopped up next to them, eyes bright with excitement born from something interesting afoot. "We can come with you! We'll help."

Orion turned a downright scathing scowl on the man. "Cease your foolishness at once. It does not become a soldier of Rome to thrill at the harm of his brothers."

Will suppressed a wince as the legionary cowered and stepped back, looking thoroughly abashed. "Forgive me, sir. I was out of place."

Will was plagued suddenly with visions of Augustus. Bright, smiling, entirely full of hope and good intentions. He saw the boy tumble from cliffs in a fall he had never witnessed; heard screams that had never reached his ears. For the briefest of moments, the horror of the recollection rooted him to the spot.

Orion huffed and tugged Will into the stores of the barracks, gesturing to an older, much calmer soldier observing from the sidelines. "Fetch those with medical training and have the men prepare a lower level of the barrack for wounded. Hot water, cloth—"

Will veered away as Orion was rattling off his orders and went to find his satchel. He hadn't made use of it since tending to Hannibal's back nearly a fortnight ago. It only occurred to him then to consider whether or not the auxilia was aware of the fourth cohort's arrival. Surely they would be aware. The entire city was buzzing with muted whispers and speculation.

Will found his satchel and tugged the strap over his shoulder, quickly ducking back to help Orion gather some emergency supplies before they ran off to the gates to help corral the wounded.

Hannibal would still be on the mend. Even if they were aware of the events taking place, he would likely send Bahadur in his place. Will had seen neither of them in days. If he was

afforded the chance and encountered Bahadur, he could ask after Hannibal's condition.

Will grit his teeth and his stomach roiled. What kind of man was he? He was more concerned with Hannibal than the state of his fellows. He should be ashamed of himself. Resolutely, he pushed thoughts of Hannibal from his mind and focused on following Orion out past the gates. Caeso and a handful of city guard were stationed just outside, waiting to receive the weary men coming down the hill.

Will was readying to approach the commander and ask if he knew anything further when he froze.

Hannibal was standing beside Caeso, back leaning ever so slightly in indication of his injury. He was in full armor and stood firm despite his condition, exchanging quiet words with the legatus. Will hovered back, not wanting to interject. His eyes were fixed firmly on the dark shine of Hannibal's hair, tied back neatly with a thin strip of leather.

Days. He hadn't seen him in *days*.

He was just now realizing how wholly he had felt the absence.

Orion cleared his throat and gave Will a pointed look, ignoring the flush he received when the younger man realized himself. "One approaches."

It took Will a moment to understand the words. Eventually, he managed to regain his composure and focus on the scene before them. An officer in full command dress was walking unsteadily ahead of the men, his gait taking him directly to Caeso. Will strained his ears to hear the conversation that took place, but they were too far away to make out anything beyond a dull murmur. Now that the man was closer, though, Will was finally able to witness the state of him.

The entire left side of his face was bruised purple, his lip split, the right sleeve of his lorica segmentata ripped and stained dark with blood. He was favoring his left leg considerably and upon closer inspection, Will realized it was because the skin was sheared clean off the front of his shin. Bone was peeking through the massacred flesh, a glinting pearl in the sunlight. It was miraculous that the man was standing upright at all with such a wound. Nothing but sheer desperation could have brought him this far.

Will's felt his throat thicken with concern. If this was the officer they had sent ahead to warn of the situation, the status of the rest of the cohort would be grim. He could almost smell the metal of the blood and the rot of infected flesh. Hours of mending and sweat and death called to him like a ghostly wind that poured from the shambling forms of the legionaries nearing the gates of Antioch.

He exchanged a look with Orion just as the sounds of their own legionaries bringing carts and supplies rumbled up behind them.

It was Caeso who broke the suffocating *unknowing* of the moment, turning stiffly on his heel and waving the two medici over. Hannibal glanced backwards and his eyes met Will's for the

briefest of moments. A spark of recognition and longing before Will was forced to tear his eyes away and listen to Caeso's orders.

"There was an unexpected attempt at the border where the cohort was stationed. They drove them back, but were unable to hold their post with the injuries they sustained," the legatus explained. "Their primary medicus cohortis was killed in the attack."

"And why did they not send word?" Orion demanded. "We could have prepared!"

At this, Caeso's face turned grim and contemplative. A curious expression flitted past his eyes. "I have been told that they did as much. Why we never received their messenger is something we will have to discover at another time. For now, do what you can to tend to these men. I must inform the general of the border attack." With a curt nod, he was already taking off in the direction of the city center.

Will groaned and rubbed some sweat off his forehead. The day was growing hotter with each moment that dragged gruelingly past. "With no medicus, how have they possibly made it this far?" He winced when he realized how loud he was and looked to see if the officer of the cohort was nearby. His shoulder sagged in guilty relief when he saw the man had returned to help bring in the men.

"He informed us that they lost many in their journey."

Will tensed and turned to Hannibal, eyebrows raised in surprise. He had been so determined to ignore the fact that the other man was there, it seemed he had succeeded in persuading himself Hannibal had been entirely a figment of his imagination. "I'm sorry?"

Hannibal frowned, but it was not as much chastising as patient. "It seems their journey lost them a quarter of their men. Were I to hazard a guess, I would say that infection from the overexertion will lose them a quarter more." He looked as though he hadn't wanted to voice the concerns but felt it necessary.

It seemed Orion disagreed. "I'll kindly thank you to trap your guessings behind closed lips," he snapped. "I will not so easily write off Roman men."

Hannibal looked taken aback, mouth open to defend himself. He sighed and decided against it when he saw the small shake of Will's head. "My apologies."

Orion snorted and ignored him. "You have medics in your auxilia, yes?" He wasn't looking at Hannibal, instead focusing his energy on directing the legionaries where to put their carts so they could wheel the less fortunate into the city.

With a nod, Hannibal made some motions towards his own men. "They are already present and entirely at your disposal."

Almost as though Orion hadn't expected the offer of help at all, he paused and gave Hannibal a calculating once over. Then, with a conciliatory grunt, he stomped off towards the soldiers who were just now reaching the gates.

Will hesitated and glanced at Hannibal through the corner of his eye. “He is grateful. As am I.”

The only response he received was a small hum of affirmation, and with that, he set off to task.

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It was hours.

Wretched, grueling, tedious hours of work and blood and grime before Will was afforded a moment to sit and rest. He had saved lives and lost others, caked over with the evidence of his efforts. Despite the unavoidable knowledge that he was doing everything in his power to ease the suffering of the unfortunate soldiers who had all but fallen at their doorstep, a niggling sense of guilt still pestered him as he found a stool outside of the hastily appointed medical ward of the barracks to escape the stench of rotting flesh and caking wounds.

Almost reflexively, he began to stand the moment his body had hit the stool, intent on jumping right back into the fray. What right had he to rest his weary legs when he had just amputated six others that very day?

He didn’t make it far. As soon as he pivoted his body towards the doorway, a heavy hand clapped onto his shoulder and levelled him right back down onto the stool. Affronted, exhausted, and more than a little perplexed, Will glowered up at the offender. His glare fell as quickly as it came.

“Bahadur.”

Will was met with a grim press of lips and a nod as Bahadur pulled up another stool and sat next to him, peering out into the approaching sunset. He wasn’t coated in gore and viscera like Will was, but fatigue was evident in every line of his body—from the way he slumped ever so slightly from his normal military stance to the deepening lines in the dark skin of his face. “Rest for a moment, Will.” He didn’t look at Will as he said it, voicing the mild order as a plea.

With a heavy sigh that rattled his bones, Will let his back thud against the wall of the barracks and followed Bahadur’s gaze into the sky.

For the longest time, they simply sat there, listening to the moans of pain the skittered out from the doorway, the beleaguered conversation of the medics still inside, the eerie whisper of death that loomed overhead like a dense cloud.

Will picked absently at the peeling blood on his arm. He hadn’t a clue who it belonged to. It likely had multiple owners.

When the soldiers of the fourth cohort had made their way to Antioch, Will knew without any hesitation that their injuries would be severe. For so many men to trek for days on end after a battle with limited supplies, no medicus, and the harsh of the tundra to deal with, they were bound to be worse for wear.

But Will was a combat medic. He saw wounds when they were still fresh and bright and crimson. He tended to gashes and slices that were still warm and flowing. He knew how to prevent infection before it began—staunch the flow of blood before it was too great—but this? This was a matter of damage long-since done. This was treating rot, and illness, and infection dug in so deep to the flesh that it oozed and seeped and brought the smell of death in living men. There was little saving Will could do here. He could only ease pain and hope that his treatments would give way to healing. Many of these men would never fight again. Many more would lose their minds to fever.

And yet the officers were calling the battle a success. They had repelled the enemy.

At the cost of an entire cohort, but repelled, nonetheless.

Will grit his teeth as a dash of wrath sluiced his insides. “How can this be—” Hissing through his teeth, he cut himself off and stopped himself short of rubbing his eyes with filthy fingers.

Bahadur gave him a perplexed look and nodded after a moment. “Acceptable?”

With a sullen frown, Will grunted.

Bahadur blinked and eyed Will’s frown, seemingly lost for words. Perhaps the struggles of the day had gotten the best of him. Before Will could even brush the conversation off, the Persian stood abruptly. “Give me a moment,” he said, and he was off into the barracks.

Will stared stupidly after him, wondering if anyone had managed to keep their sanity intact that day. His confusion was short-lived. Soon, Bahadur returned with a small bucket and cloth in hand and sat back down on his stool. With a curt gesture, he waved Will to lean over towards him and dipped the cloth in the bucket. It was water.

Too tired and miserable to argue, Will did as he was bid and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, heart tugging a bit in his chest as Bahadur began to wipe the grime from his arms with a slow and steady efficiency.

“You don’t need to do this.”

Bahadur allowed a small smile to grace his lips, but it was muted and dull. “Someone must.”

Embarrassment lingered somewhere in the background of Will’s mind. He was too lost to retrieve it. “I can do it,” he offered weakly, but he made no move to follow through and Bahadur didn’t comment further on the matter, continuing about his task.

“It…” Bahadur trailed off and scrubbed at a particularly nasty section of grit on Will’s hand. “It is acceptable because there is no option but for it not to be.”

Will let his face speak his questions for him.

“If they had failed to repel the attack, Ardashir’s army would have found their foothold in the border.”

Will scowled. “Almost an entire cohort had been rendered useless in this supposed victory. Those who have no lost their lives have lost their limbs, their health, their faculties.”

“But that does not change that it was a victory,” the other man admonished gently.

“A victory that would have been a far sight more victorious had any level of proper communication between cohorts been rendered,” Will snapped thoughtlessly. Deprivation and stress were making him careless.

He averted his eyes from Bahadur’s sudden sharp look. “Take care where you state such condemnations, Will.” At Will’s grimace of shame, he softened. “You have eyes upon you. Surely you know this better than most.”

“Not nearly as well as whatever eyes are upon me.”

Bahadur snorted and dropped the dirtied rag into the bucket. “Fair truth, but my point stands. I may be no Roman, but I know Roman ways.” He lowered his voice so it could barely be heard over the rumble of voices and cries inside. “I do not wish to hear the word ‘treason’ uttered in the same breath as your name, Will. I beg of you.”

“So I am to smile and obey and carry on as though I agree.”

Bahadur looked genuinely perplexed then. “Yes. You are a soldier.”

It was so sudden and violent, the way the fury swept through him then. Will nearly gasped from the pressure of it against his sternum. There was noise in his ears and a thousand words he could not speak threatening to vomit past his lips with abandon. With a vicious growl, Will stood so quickly that the stool toppled and Bahadur put his hands up with an expression of shock.

Will looked left and right, desperate to find an outlet for his ire and finding only shadows and helplessness. Gritting his fists so tightly his nails bit into skin, he bitterly snarled, “Yes. I am a fucking soldier, aren’t I?” and stormed off down the street and away from the barracks.

He didn’t know if Bahadur called after him or even tried to follow. He was rage-blind; deaf to the world around him as his sore feet tore him down the pathways of the city. It should have come as no surprise that as night fell his path led him straight to the auxilia appointments. Even in his haze, he had sought out Hannibal, but why? To scream at him? Shout as though this was all his fault? Cry? Seek comfort? What could Hannibal possibly do for him in such a state?

Livid at himself for bringing his burdens to the other man’s doorstep, Will whirled on his heel to make his way back to the barracks.

“Will?”

At first, he barely noticed the call, too lost within himself to pay the external any mind. Then it came again. Louder this time.

“Will!”

For a second time, a hand clapped down on Will's shoulder to stop him in his tracks. This time when Will whirled, he found the owner to be none other than Hannibal himself.

Will's mouth flapped as he tried to find something to say. Anything beyond the roaring of blood in his ears. What blurted out was: "I shouldn't have come."

The concern on Hannibal's face was suffocating. "Why ever not?"

Will yanked away from Hannibal's grip roughly, shoving his newly cleaned hands into his hair and wincing as a crush of guilt hit him when he remembered Bahadur had cleaned those hands. And he had stormed off on Bahadur like an impudent child. "I'm angry. I'm overwhelmed. I can't take this, Hannibal." Will blinked as his eyes began to burn and the words fell from his mouth like spilling seeds from a puncture. He groaned and tugged at his hair. "I shouldn't have come," he repeated. He could feel his distress mounting with each and every second. His lungs were tight. He couldn't breathe.

Hannibal's voice was a steady drum to the beat of his panic. "Then where should you be?"

Will felt a fresh burst of humiliation when a sob tore from his throat. "Away. I don't want to be here."

And somehow Hannibal knew he didn't mean the auxilia, but the city, the whole lot of it. "If I leave you here for a moment, will you remain?" When Will's heavy breathing was the only response he received, he tried again. "Will," a hesitant touch to a shoulder. "Sit here against the wall. Wait for me. Do this for me."

Will nodded and nearly fell into a ball against the wall. He felt like he was shaking out of his skin. He had no idea if any of the auxilia's men were about. He hated the thought of them seeing him like this. He hated the thought of *Hannibal* seeing him like this, but it was too late for that.

He didn't know how long Hannibal was gone. It could have been minutes or hours and he would never have been able to tell the difference. All he knew was that eventually Hannibal was hauling him to his feet and draping some kind of cloak around his shoulders to shield him from the cooling night air. He followed the other man blindly, rage slipping into a numb sort of hollow that had him staring absently at the ground as they walked.

At one point they passed through the gates. Will hadn't a clue what excuse Hannibal had given the city guard for their departure. He didn't care.

They walked for what felt like ages, until the adrenaline of anger had faded enough for Will to truly feel how much his legs hurt from standing all day and how raw his feet were in his greaves. The majority of his armor had been shed long ago in favor or a tunic as he tended to the wounded, but the greaves had proven invaluable as he travelled repeatedly to and from the stores to gather supplies.

Then, suddenly—or perhaps not so suddenly at all—they were coming to a stop. Will nearly jumped out of his skin when their movement ceased. The silence of their walk had lulled him

into an almost trance-like state, focused solely on the thud of their feet on the dirt. Hannibal's arm had left him and he looked up, dazed and lost.

They were in a grove of trees just past the hills that corralled the Northern city limits. The smell of the sea was faint here, overpowered by the soil of the earth and the crisp of river that spilled towards the farmlands. Hannibal was at the riverbed, tossing his pack down and kneeling to drink of the water. He seemed content to leave Will to his own devices.

Will shivered and tugged the cloak Hannibal had given him closer around him. It smelled of turmeric and was supple and soft. A hide of some kind. He struggled out of his greaves with some effort and sighed at the feeling of freedom.

"Why are we here?"

Hannibal gave him a nonplussed look before standing and wiping his hands dry on his tunic. "You said you needed to leave and so we did."

"Just like that?"

Hannibal tilted his head, expression unreadable. "Of course."

Will shifted back and forth on his feet. "You don't have to do this." He was saying that a lot tonight.

Hannibal eyed him for a tense moment. "You're angry."

"I was," Will countered, looking away. "I'm not anymore."

"You're not?"

Will bit the inside of his cheek; hard. "No."

With a hum, Hannibal nodded and walked steadily closer until Will could feel the warmth of him. "How well-honed your mind must be, to toss off such an overwhelming rage so quickly."

The barb speared Will straight through the chest with a hot stab of betrayal. "You *mock* me?"

And there it was again, that tilt of the head and unreadable expression. "Perhaps. Are you angry?"

Will grit his teeth together. He could hear them grind. "I told you! Not anymore! I've calmed!" The loudness of his voice was generously subdued by the trees.

Hannibal blinked. "Clearly."

Will was flabbergasted. Hannibal was goading him. He felt his back tense. "Hannibal—"

"Are you angry?"

“*Stop* asking me that!” Will hollered. He took a harsh step back and could feel his face redden. He felt hot and so he tore the cloak from his body, throwing it thoughtlessly to the ground.

Hannibal ignored the spiteful gesture, eyes a piercing weight on Will’s skin. “I’ll stop when you answer honestly.”

“Damn you, Hannibal,” Will growled. “Leave it be!”

Hannibal took a step forward. “I will not. Tell me why you’re angry.”

“It’s unimportant!”

“So unimportant it led you to me, shaking and inconsolable, desperate to flee the city?”

The anger was building in him again like something dark and wretched. Will could feel it making his vision go black and spotty. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t care!” Hannibal’s shout was a shocking thing. It rang in Will’s ears like the cry of a banshee, slapping through him like thunder.

For a moment, it was all Will could do to stand upright and breathe. Then, the floodgates opened. With a roar, Will threw himself at the older man, swinging a clumsy fist at his face. The jab was easily dodged and with a simply twist of hips Will found himself thrown into an unceremonious heap onto the ground, twigs digging into his face. He saw red.

Lunging back up, he tackled Hannibal around the middle. The man may have been bigger then him, but Will was fierce in his determination. Where he lacked in strength, he overcompensated with sheer primal abandon. Hannibal’s hand twisted one of his arms back and away and Will repaid the move with a knee into the side of his thigh and a head straight into Hannibal’s chin.

Hannibal released him with a gasp, blinking away stars as Will went for him again, this time managed to land a punch straight into the man’s stomach before his legs were kicked out from under him and he was on the forest floor again.

He gave no thought the Hannibal’s healing injury. All he could think was how he wanted to tear something apart, rip into it with his hands, bite at it with his teeth. If Hannibal was offering to be that conductor of his rage, so be it.

Will was sick of feeling useless. He was smothered by the weight of everything happening and his powerlessness to stop it. He was disgusted with himself for having no voice. He was absolutely, unforgivably tired of being a soldier.

And so he was off the ground again, grappling with Hannibal inelegantly as he tried to scream everything he wasn’t allowed to with his fists. Leave his words as bruises. Let his voice be heard with every blow.

Hannibal didn’t fight back, merely turning every one of Will’s attacks upon himself, sending him toppling to the ground or into a tree more than once. Every now and then one of Will’s

attacks would land home and the commander would grunt with the blow before twisting Will around on himself again like he was no more a challenge than a child's doll.

Soon, they were both panting and flushed and bruised. Will was sweating and near tears and he tried to push Hannibal against a tree, but his legs were unsteady and weak and instead Hannibal took him down, both of them falling to the ground. Will wheezed out a strained breath as Hannibal's large hands shoved his shoulders into the dirt. He could feel a twig digging into the skin of his left arm. A muscular, unforgiving body pinned him down from head to toe and the red, frustrated face of Hannibal hovered above his own.

"Why," Hannibal panted wetly and it became clear to Will then how he had just picked a fight with an injured man. "Why are you angry, Will?" His hands slid off Will's shoulders and he fell to his elbows, bracketing Will as he held himself up. "Tell me."

Will clenched his eyes shut and pretended he couldn't feel the hot of tears sliding down his temples. "I'm powerless."

"You are not."

"Yes I am, Hannibal!" Will's hoarse cry made his throat feel raw. He forced his eyes open to look at the man above him. "I'm absolutely powerless in all of this! I just cleaned the walking carcasses of over a hundred men and can't say a damned thing about it." He reached up and buried his hands in Hannibal's dark hair. The tie had fallen out of it sometime during their scuffle, leaving the black strands hanging down around his face. He just needed something to hold onto. Something beautiful to grab onto when everything felt like it was slipping through his fingers. "I can't say how wrong this all feels. How this doesn't feel like a war, but like lunacy. I'm simply told to accept it. That is my position. To accept. I cannot. I cannot do this."

Hannibal didn't correct him. He didn't say this wasn't true. He didn't agree and say that yes, this was Will's lot in life. Instead, he leaned his head into Will's aggressive grip and smiled. "Most men would see these things and know not why they felt unsettled by them. You look at this chaos and you see the flaw of it. You recognize wholly and unequivocally that there is something very wrong about what is happening in this war. You recognize it enough to put thoughts to it—words to it—and *that* is power. The power of knowledge. The power of awareness."

Will laughed manically. "What use is awareness if nothing can be done with it? If I can say nothing of what I see, what purpose does it serve?"

Hannibal leaned down and pressed their foreheads together until the image of him blurred. They both shut their eyes, breathing together. Sharing air. "You may not be given the freedom to speak to those who need to hear it, but you have the power to act where you can. Your actions are just as vital as any man's."

"You make it sound so simple." Will gentled his hands and began to card them through Hannibal's hair. When he heard the hitch of breath above him, his adrenaline from the fight began to take a different turn. His fingers tightened reflexively and Hannibal let more of his bodyweight sag on top of him.

“It isn’t simple.” Hannibal’s voice had roughened ever so slightly, the barest edge of grit to indicate that his mind had veered similarly. His head lowered, cheek scraping against Will’s as he breathed hot against his ear. “Nothing about this is simple, but neither are you.”

Will bit his lip and ran one hand down Hannibal’s side, mindful now of his back in a way he knew with a sickening lurch he hadn’t been during their scrap. He rucked up the tunic and felt delicately along the bandage guarding his wound. “I’m sorry.”

Hannibal huffed out an amused breath against Will’s neck and the young Roman shivered. “I am healed enough.”

Will rolled his eyes and turned, pressing his mouth to the juncture of Hannibal’s shoulder. “Not nearly.” His lips brushed overheated skin and his legs shifted restlessly. He tasted salt and licked to get more of it.

With a rough roll of hips into the ones below him, Hannibal nipped at the curve of Will’s jaw. “I am healed *enough*.” An open invitation. One that Will couldn’t ignore.

Their mouths were together in a blink after that, sparing no time for courtesy or patience. Hannibal’s tongue tasted deeply of Will, drinking him in. Will’s hands jolted down to the hips rolling fluidly into his own, sliding back over his rear to pull him closer, part his own legs, demand more of him. One of them groaned, perhaps both, and then their movements became frantic.

They were biting at each other’s lips, tongues licking wet and hot and dirty as their hands stroked and grabbed at every inch of skin they could reach. Will felt tears at his eyes again. These were ones of a culmination of frustration. Month after month of desiring Hannibal, wanting him, craving him, and being unable to have him. Months of *need*. Will groaned raggedly and tugged at the waist of Hannibal’s trousers, letting out a weak laugh as Hannibal sat up to yank off Will’s shorts only to ease them under his hips to protect his skin from the harsh underbrush of the forest floor.

Then they were bare, with Hannibal’s trousers somewhere around his thighs and Will’s shorts likely getting destroyed with each movement they made. And, *oh*, Will let out the kind of sound he only made in his dreams when he felt Hannibal’s cock sliding heavy and hard next to his own on his stomach, wetting his skin in the kind of animalistic way that had his mind reeling and his thighs tensing.

Hannibal’s mouth fell to his neck and Will was a mess of gasping grunts when the other man reached beneath him pry him apart and rub a dry finger at his entrance—teasing, massaging, driving him to madness with want. Will couldn’t find it in himself to ask if Hannibal had brought his oils with him in his pack. It was all the way on the riverbed and Will didn’t want to move. He couldn’t. Not with how the tongue on his neck was drawing hard circles on his skin and finger beneath him was offering such a perfect pressure.

Finally.

He wrapped his legs around Hannibal’s hips, opening himself up more, and Hannibal responded by bringing his hand up to quickly lick his fingers against Will’s neck, refusing to

pull away from him for even an instant, before returning down to his task, now sliding hot and slick with saliva and sweat.

Will shuddered and moaned again, grabbing at their cocks between them and jerking up into Hannibal's body as he pressed both the heads together just so before his fingers slipped off completely. They were too big together for his fist to wrap around properly, but it didn't matter. He licked his palm brazenly, Hannibal watching him with dark and ravenous eyes, and slid his slick palm over the crowns of them. He reveled in the way Hannibal's face grew slack and the thrust of his hips sharpened, driving one of his questing fingers inside Will to the first knuckle.

"Ah!" Will scratched at the back of Hannibal's neck with his free hand and pulled him back down to his neck, holding him close. "Yes, I—" He choked off on another groan as Hannibal fully seated his finger, rolling his entire hand around in circles with each thrust of his hips.

"Yes?" Hannibal murmured against his neck, biting teasingly into the flesh.

Will turned his attentions fully to Hannibal's cock. The occasional hard and heady drag of Hannibal's length against his own, the writhing press of the tongue against his oversensitive neck, the relentless twist and curl of the finger inside him. All of those things were driving him closer to completion with each passing second. With a hand wrapped firmly around Hannibal, he began to stroke with purpose, soaking in each gasp and hitch of breath he earned like the air he needed to live.

He let himself drown in Hannibal's pleasure, feeling it tingle over his skin like warm water. Then a second finger joined the first and Will's vision whited out and he was coming with a shock, body curling into Hannibal's and hips rolling desperately down onto the other man's fingers and he held fast to his shoulders.

As he came down, he realized that Hannibal had taken over Will's former task, stroking himself with a fervor as he tried to claim his own end with his face still buried in Will's neck. Sated and shaking, Will grabbed the sides of his face and lifted his head to press their lips together. Will was too tired and Hannibal too far gone for either of them to kiss properly. Their lips and tongues slid over each other lazily as Hannibal began to tense. Will dug his fingers into dark hair and urged him on with legs still wrapped around his hips.

When Hannibal came, he groaned loudly against Will's tongue and streaked his stomach wet and sticky. Will's belly quivered at the feel of it and his own soft cock gave a useless twitch.

Hannibal collapsed half on top of him, giving him room to breathe as he rested his head on his forearm against the ground. They both lay there, panting heavily and slowly getting chilled by the night air.

Hannibal was the first to speak, voice more hoarse and destroyed than Will had ever heard it. He found he liked the sound. "I promise you, this was not my plan in bringing you here."

Will chuckled. "If it had been, I would be terribly displeased right now."

Hannibal lifted his head and regarded the other man quizzically. "Truly?"

Will quirked a playful brow at him. “If you had planned this, I would have much preferred that you’d made proper preparations and given me more than your fingers.” His mouth went dry at the way Hannibal’s gaze darkened. He held his ground, refusing to be embarrassed when he still felt the evidence of their intimacy cooling on his stomach. “As it stands, I have no complaints.”

Hannibal reached up to stroke Will’s face, stopping when he realized how dirty they were. “Ah. Perhaps we should utilize the river.”

Will looked down at his belly, which was now dripping down his sides. “Yes,” he snickered. “That might be wise.”

Bathing was a quiet affair. The rigorous bite of the cold river was enough to throw any man into silence, elevating practicality to the utmost importance. Soon enough, they were clean and dressed and walking slowly back to Antioch. Neither possessed any desire to rush, clinging to these sweet and simple moments of privacy that Will’s outburst had uniquely afforded them.

When the torchlights of Antioch stood twinkling in the distance, Will chewed his lip and glanced sideways at his companion.

Hannibal raised his eyebrows and continued to look ahead. “Speak your mind, Will.”

“Emperor Severus will arrive soon.”

Hannibal made a noise of agreement, face taking on a frown of contemplation. “Your duties with the men in your care will be rushed.”

“How do you mean?”

“They’ll want to transport the wounded to another city. Likely Damascus.” Hannibal’s voice had taken on the authoritative and decided tone of a leader. He did not doubt what he was saying and it gave Will pause.

“Whatever for?” Will felt his frustration begin to mount. A bitter tang at the back of his mouth and he felt justice undone. “The men are in no shape to be moved!”

Hannibal stopped, then, and turned fully to look down at Will. “Leaving the men here allows for too many risks of incident. The emperor is not a man of war. This much has been made unavoidably clear. For him to witness—”

“For him to witness the consequences of his errors might open his eyes!” Will exclaimed, waving his hands about as though the obvious point lay all around them.

“Precisely the perspective that might cause incident,” Hannibal replied softly. He looked defeated and apologetic. “You are not the only soldier who feels this way, Roman or otherwise. The resentment of his… vigorous need for diplomacy is spreading. To keep these men here invites a challenge on the emperor’s tactics. It could be seen as an assault on his guidance.”

“One does not question the emperor,” Will grumbled balefully, scowling at the ground.

“Just so.” Hannibal exhaled an uncharacteristically weary sigh. “Keeping the men here would only fuel the fire of discontent. It would give the men displeased by the turns of the war the motivation they needed to dissent.”

Will gaped at him. “You truly believe that keeping the wounded of the fourth will inspire rebellion?”

Hannibal shook his head dismissively. “I will not deny the possibility and I know that your general will have come to a similar conclusion.” He reached out and stroked a thumb over Will’s cheekbone with a look of unreserved affection. “Tend to the men as best you can, Will. Prepare them for travel. I will thrill in being proven wrong, but you should be prepared for the order.”

Will’s shoulders sank and he leaned gratefully into Hannibal’s palm, soaking in the last remnants of comfort he would likely receive for some days to come. He felt sick to his stomach. An unease was tensing up his gut and making acid crawl up his throat. “This is all so terribly unfair.”

Hannibal used his hand to pressure Will’s head up to meet his gaze. “Then watch. Observe. Bide your time, dear Will. One day, the time will come for you to act. Watch for that moment and seize it when it comes. You have the power to recognize your own knowledge and turn it to action, which makes you a god among men.”

Will huffed. “I am no god.”

Hannibal smiled and tilted Will’s chin up for a chaste kiss. “I will never see you as anything but.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“Many truths widely believed are simply lies that caught fashion.”

Chapter Notes

My goodness, an update that didn't take six months! You are not hallucinating, I promise.
On top of that, I've planned out the remainder and now know how many chapters we will have. It will end with 27 total.

Happy thanksgiving to those of you in places that celebrate it (Enjoy your food, but please remember what this holiday *truly* is. History is important and not always pretty.). Here, have a heaping dose of foreshadowing to go with your dinner.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a mere four days before Hannibal’s prediction came to pass and the order to prepare the injured soldiers for transport fell down the chain of command.

“You’re mad!” Orion’s face was contorted into a snarl and he slammed his fist into the wall. Will winced.

Caeso crossed his arms over his chest, but the sternness of his gaze faltered. “Orion, please. This helps nothing.”

Orion laughed bitterly. “What does not *help* is sending dying men on a trek that will take them in open tundra. It is, at best, a six-day journey to Damascus. And that is with consideration towards very little in the ways of rest.”

Caeso sighed wearily and ran a hand through his chestnut hair. “I am aware. Regardless, my orders are to send these men to Damascus. They will receive better medical treatment there. There are physicians there. The population is much greater.” The argument rang hollow in the room.

Will felt a bone-wrenching pity towards Caeso. He knew he was just doing as he was told. The idea that he agreed with the orders given was laughable. Will knew him well enough to be sure of it.

Orion did not seem to share Will's sympathy. "Better medical treatment? That is the official word, then?"

The implication was a dangerous question of authority. Even Orion, veteran as he may have been, should have watched himself. Will felt his shoulders tensing of their own accord. "Orion," he cautioned.

Caeso frowned, the blatant impertinence darkening his gaze severely. "I am aware that this is not ideal, medicus cohortis." His cold snap of Orion's title caused the older man to stand to attention on reflex. "Be that as it may, it is your order." Caeso waited until he held Orion's gaze. "An order that you will execute without further questions or I shall put Will in charge of enacting it posthaste. Consider your decision carefully."

Will felt his stomach churn at being used as a weapon against his superior, but he knew the barb was earned. All he could do was shift uncomfortably on the sidelines and keep his eyes low to the ground.

Orion scowled something fierce and nodded. "At your command, legatus. I will happily pack these men up to die on the road." With that, he turned on his heel and stormed away.

With a laden breath, Caeso rubbed his hand over his face and held it there over his eyes, standing silently in the middle of the floor. After a long moment, his hand fell away. "Warn your mentor off his behavior, Will. Now is not the time for balking at orders."

Will let out a helpless chuckle. "He won't listen to me."

"On the contrary." Caeso turned and gave Will a look that was not overly harsh. "You're the only one we stand a chance of him listening to. Orion is a good medic. Talented by any standards, but that commendation will fall on deaf ears."

"Whose ears?" Will swallowed against the dryness in his throat. "The general?"

"No." For what seemed to be a moment elongated in time—suspended, holding fast to denial—Caeso didn't finish his thought. He searched Will's face for something. Forgiveness, perhaps, for what he was about to say. "Mine. I cannot have any of my men questioning me. *Ever,* preferably, but now it is unthinkable. I will do what I must. If I must see Orion's service at its end, I will do so if it is required. That…" he shook his head and turned away. "That sentiment extends to the entirety of this cohort."

Will's heart dropped to his feet. "If you plan to make an example of Orion—"

"I hope I will not have to."

"Caeso." Will reached out and hesitantly grabbed his friend's arm. "The men respect you. There is no need—"

Caeso stepped away and out of Will's reach. He gentled his expression to temper the hurt on Will's face. "You do not understand the severity of the situation, Will. Should my authority

even appear to be in question, I will lose that authority entirely. Is that what you wish to happen?"

Will's mouth tasted sour and he grit his teeth. "No. Of course not."

"Try to understand—"

"I do," Will spat. He clenched his fists tight and his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "I do. Truly. But though I may understand, I take no pleasure in the knowledge."

Caeso smiled weakly. "Yes, well. Knowledge is its own burden, isn't it?"

Will had nothing to say to that, so he nodded and stared towards the section of the barracks that housed the remaining wounded members of the fourth.

Caeso shifted wearily on his feet, opened his mouth, and closed it once more. After a breath, he stood straighter and gripped his helmet to his side. "Do what you can to prepare these men. They are welcome to any provisions necessary for the journey. Do not leave the caravan wanting."

"Is that really the best we can do?" Will murmured quietly.

"Yes. It is." The legatus grudgingly turned and left the barracks, abandoning Will to stand alone in his unease.

Grinding his teeth together in an effort to focus on something other than his own doubts, Will set off in the direction Orion had left. He found him after a short search. The older man was forcefully packing bandaging cloths into a satchel, outwardly displaying every ounce of discontent Will felt twisting inside his own chest.

Orion allowed Will to watch him silently for a time, too busy fuming for conversation. When the satchel was too full for anything further, he tossed it aside and slumped back against the wall in a crouch. "Tell your comrade that I will not stand silently by as he dooms these men to their deaths."

Multiple emotions flickered over Will's countenance, then. He settled for apathy. "I will tell him no such thing."

Orion's head jerked at the comment, but he made no move to argue it. He was a man of conviction, but even men of conviction knew when they were beaten. "I am far too old for the politics of war, Willhelm."

"I'm far too young for them."

Orion laughed, but it was a derisive sound. "He's sent you to calm me."

"I would never try something so foolish." Will attempted to smile. It came out crooked. "Besides, you know anything I would say. I agree with you, Orion. So does Caeso."

"I know he does, boy."

“Then why fight him so?”

“The day that I blindly accept that I, as a man of healing, should willingly send men to their deaths will be the day that I accept the welcoming arms of Hades.”

Will’s brows rose. “You believe in that? In Hades? The gods?”

Orion rolled his eyes and pushed himself up from the ground. “I have seen more death than even you, boy. I believe in any number of hereafters. They are all as likely as the next. Who are we to know what all this chaos will lead to in the end?”

Will chewed his lip and hummed an acknowledgment. “Is there one you prefer?”

“I prefer to focus on the worlds of the living.” Orion fixed Will with a probing stare. “And so should you. It does not do to wonder of death when you are trying to help others hold onto their last breath.”

“Is that not the art of healing?” Will couldn’t help but ask. It was a question that gnawed at him at night. “To heal is to fear death. You cannot truly expect to be able to save lives if you do not fear what happens if you fail.”

“Is that why you heal, boy?” Orion had begun to gather up supplies again, packing them away in sacks that would later be taken to the carts headed for Damascus. Will joined him. “Fear?”

Will wasn’t entirely sure he knew the answer to that question, so he countered it with its mirror. “Why do you?”

Orion snorted but humored him. “I heal because I was once a warrior. I fought in endless battles and wars and took many lives by my own hand. I became a medic to…” He heaved out a sigh. “To atone.”

Taken aback by the honesty that Orion rarely offered him, Will was stunned by the honor of the revelation. “Thank you.” He licked his dry lips. “For telling me.”

“Don’t be foolish.” Orion shook his head as though warding away distant memories or emotions or whatever vexed him and gestured back towards their patients. “I need an extensive list of ailments. If we are to send these men out on the ‘morrow, I would know what preventative measures need to be taken.”

Will handed off his bag and stood with a nod. “Of course.” He was about to leave the storage when Orion’s voice stopped him.

“You never answered me, you know.”

“I’m sorry?”

Orion didn’t look back, continuing about his task. Will felt grateful for the privacy the action allowed him. “Why do you heal, Willhelm?”

Will stood uselessly in the doorway, arms hanging at his side. His fingers felt numb. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t make a liar of yourself.”

Blinking, Will looked out of the room. “I suppose I heal because I…” He bit his lip and hesitated. In the end, Orion’s own honesty all but pulled his own truth from his belly. “The challenge. I do not fear death.”

“You want to best it.”

“Yes. Do you disapprove?”

“Had I ever seen you joyous towards the wounds of others, perhaps,” Orion responded indifferently. “But you have a level of compassion I rarely witness in someone who has been so often coated in blood. I do not disapprove, Willhelm. You are a talented healer. I’ve no doubt you will take my place as medicus cohortis someday.” He tossed another bag to the side of the storage room and finally brought his gaze over to the young medic. “Though it seems that might be sooner than I anticipated.”

Will cut a negative hand through the air. “Caeso wishes no such thing. You simply must be careful. We are under close watch.”

“Ah, yes,” Orion crossed his arms over his head and a cynicism crept into every inch of his posture. “Our duty-bound governing body.”

Will flinched.

“Calm yourself.” Orion raised a palm. “I have made my complaints clear. Caeso is not my enemy and I will not endeavor to make him one. You have my word.”

Feeling entirely out of his own reach of authority, Will nodded with a grimace and hastened to leave the room. Orion had given him a task. The least he could do after damn near chiding the man was see it through.

He grabbed his stool and made his way towards the first of many bedsides, settling down beside an older soldier whose leg Will had amputated some days ago when he was unable to stave off the infection. The man hadn’t uttered so much as a single complaint since the operation, content to lay on his bed and accept whatever treatment he was offered. He never asked for a relief from pain, was always honest with his answers on his condition, and watched over the room in quiet observation most of the day.

Will enjoyed his company and found himself sitting alongside him often once the others had been tended to. He smiled. “Hello, Marcellus.”

Marcellus didn’t return the smile. Then again, he never did, so it wasn’t unusual. “Hello, Will. I’ve heard a great deal of shouting today.” The unspoken question filtered into the stale air.

Will scratched at the back of his neck. “I should let Orion be the one to tell you about that. It isn’t my place.”

Marcellus grunted and reached over, patting Will’s knee before returning his hand to his own chest. “You don’t need to. We already know.”

Will’s eyes widened. Had Caeso come through and told them? No, that wasn’t possible. He had left the barracks entirely. “You do?”

“We aren’t ignorant, Will. The emperor is due here shortly. We cannot remain.”

“And you agree with this assessment?”

“It is not my place to agree or disagree, but we have all accepted our fates.” Marcellus glanced at the others who were all either sleeping or pointedly ignoring the conversation. He reached down and gently touched at the bandaging around the new stump of his right leg. The fabric was coloring unpleasantly and Will could smell the flesh. It was not healing well. “Do not fear for us. We are strong.”

“I know.” Will moved to push Marcellus’ hand away. “I need to rebandage this. Do you want something for pain?”

“Nothing you have to give me will suffice. Do not concern yourself.”

Will huffed and grabbed some clean bandages from his bag. “It is my purpose to concern myself with your condition, Marcellus.”

“Allow that purpose to focus on men who will live to see another summer.”

Will laid the bandages on the soldier’s chest and gave him a strict look. “Hold these for me. I must fetch a basin.” He stood and shook his head. “The stubbornness of men.”

“You grumble as though you are not cursed by the very same trait,” Marcellus rebuked.

“I never denied it,” Will replied with a shrug.

This time, Marcellus answered him with a smile.

And with that one gesture, Will knew the other man was going to die.

He did what he could.

In the hours that followed, Will became smothered by the stench of defeat and submission. All of the older soldiers of the fourth had guessed just as easily as Marcellus had about their fate and the younger ones had cottoned on quickly. Much to Will’s enduring consternation, none of them seemed particularly put off by the circumstances. They had all accepted that they were to be tossed out as unwanted burdens. Will couldn’t understand it.

Perhaps they were truly that weary. Their wounds were grave and health declining so rapidly that it made the very air surrounding them thick and difficult to breathe. They were men who

had already acknowledged their approaching ends.

Will discovered that some of them were even relieved by the command. They preferred to die on their feet—moving forward—rather than on their backs, rotting away.

In that respect, he didn't blame them.

He was so deeply entrenched in the monotony of facing empty, placid expressions that it was a relief when someone finally came to drag him away from the stifle. That person was Jove.

"What is it?" Will asked as Jove guided him with a steady hand on his shoulder out back of the barracks to some benches. "Has something happened?"

Jove shrugged and reached into his pack to pull out two plums, tossing one to Will as they sat down. "More or less."

Will nodded in thanks for the fruit and took a generous bite, closing his eyes in contentment as the tang of it burst into his mouth. They ate in silence for a moment, fingers sticky and dusk falling rapidly around them. Will finished off his small meal and set the pit on the bench next to him. He licked his lips and turned an inquisitive eye to his companion. "Take your time."

Jove chortled and leaned his back into the wall. He stared up into the sky. "Caeso came to me."

Will's brows furrowed. "About sending the soldiers of the fourth to Damascus?"

Perplexed, Jove looked over. "What? No. They're sending the fourth to Damascus?"

Will's mouth flapped, unsure if he had just revealed something he shouldn't have. The damage had been done, either way, so he nodded. "Caeso came to Orion and myself shortly after dawn. Laurentinus has ordered us to prepare the wounded for travels to Damascus. His reasoning is that the city has physicians."

"His reasoning." Jove mulled over the words and looked back at the sky. "I see." His tone held enough tacit understanding to make Will's temples sweat.

"If that wasn't what you came to me about…" Will let the words trail off and hang in the air questioningly.

"Ah, right." Jove leaned forward on his knees. "As you, and I, and everyone else, and all their neighbors are well aware, the emperor is coming."

Will watched him silently, unsure of where the conversation was headed. Jove gestured towards his pack and Will noticed for the first time that it wasn't only a satchel for food. It was for travel.

"Caeso has ordered myself and a handful of cavalry to take horses and intercept the emperor's caravan." Jove looked neither thrilled nor displeased by the order. "We are still

getting reports of attempts on the border and our foothold in Syria is flimsy at best. Laurentinus wishes for the emperor to have an escort."

"Are his own soldiers not enough of an escort?"

Jove eyed him oddly. "We are all his soldiers."

Will paled and pursed his lips. "You know quite well what I mean."

"From what I'm told, he decided to take primarily infantry with him," Jove replied after a brief pause. "He has very little in the way of mounted men with him, which would prove disadvantageous should he encounter trouble."

Will bit the inside of his cheek to hold off his unneeded retorts. They would do no good. "How long will you be gone?"

"A week. Two at most."

"And Valerian knows?"

Jove smiled. "I'm off to him next."

Will felt bizarrely undeserving of being the first to know, especially before Valerian. "Why come to me first?"

Jove thought on his words for the longest time after that. His smile wavered, but stayed where it was. He clapped a palm over Will's knee and let it sit there. "Because I am more concerned about leaving you behind than anyone else."

Will let the warmth of his friend's hand seep into his skin and he closed his eyes. "I'm perfectly well, Jove."

"I may not have known you as long as Caeso and Tertius, but I still have many years with you, Will," Jove said softly.

"I'm not going to do anything foolish."

"I should hope not. If you're going to be foolish, give us all warning so we can help you," Jove squeezed Will's knee and quirked his smile into something lopsided.

Will rolled his eyes and swatted Jove lightly on the shoulder. "If you all keep promising to walk into fire with me, don't complain when you begin to burn."

Jove hummed and sat back, withdrawing his hand. "I merely want you to be careful. If you hear murmurings of a rebellious sort, stay away from them. Turn around, Will. Don't look."

"And if—" Will cut himself off and wrung his hands together. "And if I agree with the murmurings?"

"Then agree in silence. Now is not the time."

“I keep hearing that.”

“Then there must be some truth to it.”

“Many truths widely believed are simply lies that caught fashion,” Will countered with a scoff.

A deep and genuine concern worried every feature on Jove’s face and he searched Will’s eyes with his own. “Tell me my concern is unwarranted, Will. I beg you.”

Will’s shoulders slumped. “They are unwarranted. I may have misgivings, but they will not fall to action.”

Jove shut his eyes in relief. “Good,” he breathed. “Two weeks, then.” He stood and pulled the strap of his satchel over his shoulder. “Ensure Valerian sleeps every now and then, won’t you? You know his tendency to overdo himself.”

Will smirked. “I’ll knock him out if I have to.”

With one last smile and nod, Jove was on his way.

Once again, Will felt left in the wake of happenings; adrift in the debris of all that was going on around him. “I won’t do anything,” he whispered into the dimming sky. “What *can* I do?”

Deciding now was as good a time as any to pay a visit to Hannibal, Will hefted himself up and set on his path to the auxilia. He hadn’t seen the other man since he had stolen him away from Antioch to have his breakdown. There wasn’t any other word for it. No matter which way Will twisted and turned the memory in his mind, it always shaped into the same thing.

He had broken. However brief it had been, a part of him had snapped. He couldn’t help but wonder if it would happen again—if his constitution was really so faltering.

Will was startled out of his thoughts by a violent shove to his shoulder. Shocked, he stumbled backwards, head whipping up to see the face of an angry townsperson. The man had a red face and a bald head and will realized quite quickly that he was not alone. Two other men were beside him, lingering back as though waiting for an opportune moment.

“You’re him, aren’t you?”

Will blinked through his surprise and took a step back. “I’m sorry?”

“The legionary who attacked Roman men,” the red-faced man spat. “Who protected *them*.” He jerked a calloused thumb in the direction of the auxilia, too far away and blocked by buildings to even be seen.

“I think you’re confused,” Will said carefully, taking another step back. He looked around, but there were no other soldiers in sight. Any townspeople still on the streets that late in the evening were merely watching indifferently from where they stood. A city guard stood some distance away, too far for Will to make out his face. After a moment, the guard turned around and left. Will was on his own.

“I think you’re confused, *boy*,” the man snarled, taking a lunging step forward and shoving Will’s shoulder again. “You’ve forgotten your own empire. Your own allegiances.”

“You are mistaken!” Will defended hotly. His face was flushing and his eyes were watering. His hand reflexively went to where his gladius should be, but he wasn’t in his armor. There was no sword. He didn’t know what to do. “Please. I am a soldier of the imperial legion. Let me pass!”

“A soldier defends his own people! Instead, you attack them!”

“I did defend our people!” Will shouted back. A rage that didn’t feel like his own was beginning to make his blood boil alongside the fear. “Those men in the auxilia have fought for us, bled for us, died for us! I defended them as I would have defended my brothers in the legion!” He centered himself more solidly on the ground and got in the man’s face. “Do not speak to me of allegiance when you would defend men who lifted a blade against those who have fought to protect them!”

Perhaps the man had not been expecting a fight. Will was out of his armor. He was small. He was unintimidating. When he realized his miscalculation, he took steps back from the legionary, a stupid and embarrassed rage reddening him all the way to his ears. He appeared to be at a loss for words.

“*Let me pass*,” Will growled.

The man stood clunkily, eyes darting to the street and back to Will. A voice shattered his indecision for him.

“Please, we don’t wish trouble here. Let us maintain our peace.”

Will looked past the man’s shoulder to find Bahadur calmly standing a few paces away, hands behind his back and assuming the most nonthreatening posture possible.

The man reeled back as though he presumed all Persians to be plagues upon themselves. Will was appalled by the display and stepped right up next to Bahadur as though to prove a point. Bahadur gave him an amused look.

“I am sorry that you feel this way,” Will said to the townsman tightly. It was everything he could do to reign in his temper. “But I implore you to remember that I am a soldier of the legion, as are the auxilia. Do well to remember that fact.”

Before he could receive a reply, Bahadur was dragging him away by the elbow. The older man waited until there were long out of earshot before he stopped and hauled Will into a dark nook at the side of one of the buildings. There, he let go of Will and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Tell me why I always seem to find you connected to any and all dramatics in this damned city.” Bahadur was fiercer than Will had ever seen him and it was all he could do not to flinch away from the manner of him.

“It’s not intentional!”

“Of course it isn’t.” Bahadur propped one shoulder against the wall and glanced out into the street to make sure no one had followed them. “Had I thought you sought out trouble intentionally I would have left you to your own devices. As it is,” he frowned and turned his eye to Will. “I could hear your shouts from a great distance.”

Will clenched his fists. “He cornered me. Was I to do nothing?”

Bahadur groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Surely you know that shouting at the people of Antioch openly on the streets will win you no favor.”

Will deflated. “I know that.”

Bahadur levelled him with a critical look.

“I *do* know that.” Will ran a hand through his hair and shifted restlessly on his feet. “It’s been a long day.”

“Every day is long.” Bahadur looked Will up and down and seemed to see something in him that made him take pity. In increments, his stance began to soften. “What has happened?”

Will looked out into the streets, afraid of being overheard. “Enough to successfully maintain my frustrations.” He grimaced. “I shouted at you. Back at the barracks.”

For a moment, Bahadur looked confused. Realization took him quickly. “That was days ago.”

“Time doesn’t lessen the fact,” Will responded apologetically. “I am sorry, for what it’s worth.”

Bahadur raised one shoulder in a poor imitation of a shrug. “It’s worth a great deal. I accept.”

“So simply?”

“Of course. Did you expect me to force guilt upon you endlessly?” The Persian’s eyes crinkled at the edges. “You are frayed and it took its toll. You are only human, Will.”

“You and Hannibal have made quite the habit of making sure my humanity doesn’t consume me,” Will joked. The truth of it made the humor fall flat.

“Hannibal found me a decade ago,” Bahadur offered quite suddenly, gesturing for Will to follow him as he began to walk towards the militia’s barracks. “When I was your age.”

Will moved to keep pace with him, looking over with interest. “Found you?”

Bahadur made a noise of affirmation. Dust was kicking up around their feet and stars were beginning to show in the sky. “I fear you may be displeased to learn that I was a criminal where I come from.”

“I admit I am surprised, but you’ll find no judgment from me.”

When Bahadur couldn't seem to find his next words, Will couldn't help himself, so he asked. "What did you do?"

Once again, amusement was back on Bahadur's face as he looked sideways at Will. "Theft. When I was caught, I fled rather than face the punishment. I was to lose my hand."

"Your hand?" Will felt ill. He had seen his fair share of nauseating punishments in Rome, but loss of limb had yet to be one he had witnessed anywhere other than the battlefield. "What could you have possibly stolen to warrant such a retribution?"

Bahadur lifted his left hand and looked down at it. Will wondered if that was the one he would have lost. If he even knew which one he would have lost. "A horse," came his brusque answer. "From a noble family."

"Ah." Will made a face. "I can see how that would have been taken badly."

Bahadur laughed. "Yes, well. I fled and made my way through the Roman borders. This was before the war began, so it was far easier for a man such as me to enter your empire's territory." They rounded a corner and the barracks came into view. "Unfortunately, I brought nothing with me. Fleeing does not lend to proper planning. When Hannibal found me, I was hiding in farmlands and stealing crops to live. He took me in."

Will felt his chest warm. "That was good of him."

A nod. "It was. I had assumed he did it out of some misplaced feeling of kinship due to our origins. Turns out he had done it because someone had done the same for him when he had first come here. I've asked him to tell me about it over the years, but he doesn't talk about it much."

A frown whittled its way past Will's lips and he wondered at the revelation. Hannibal had told him bits and pieces about why he had fled his home, but Will was still very much in the dark about it all. His mind jumped back to the markings that adorned Hannibal's skin. He had grown so accustomed to them that he had almost entirely forgotten about them, despite seeing their black sweeps in every glimpse of the man's arms.

A memory swam into the fog of his mind. Hannibal speaking of his time as a slave and the man from whom he took his freedom.

He accepted his fate, in the end. Looked upon me as I held his own blade to his throat and told me not to waste the blood I spilled from him.

But he had told Will nothing of the times after he fled. Just as Bahadur, Hannibal must have had nothing but the clothing on his back. Someone had taken him in, but who? Each time Will felt like he was beginning to truly know Hannibal, he was forcefully reminded that he still possessed little information regarding him.

"Somehow, I feel, that were you to be the one to ask him, he might tell you."

Will smiled bashfully over at Bahadur. “My thirst for knowledge lies ever apparent on my face, I see.”

“As ever.”

They came to a stop in front of the appointments. A few men were sitting out front and they nodded over at the two new arrivals. Will felt a tightness in his chest at how he was welcomed as one of them without so much as a blink of an eye. Months ago, had someone told him that would be the case he would have laughed outright at the ludicrousness of the suggestion. Yet, here he was.

“Hannibal was out back last I saw him. Training with the men.” Bahadur pointed through one of the archways.

Will made a face. “With his back? Should he be training yet?”

Bahadur’s lips quirked. “You tell me, Will. You are the medic.”

With a hefty flush, Will ducked his head and rubbed his arm. “Ah, yes. As long as he moves cautiously, he should be mended enough to train. Forgive me.”

“For being concerned about someone you care about?” Bahadur chuckled. “I will forgive no such thing.”

Will snorted and felt a grin pull at his lips. The mirth fell from his eyes when he looked back towards the city. “Thank you for intervening with that man.” He kept his voice as level as possible to truly press on the gratitude he felt—the gratitude he *always* felt towards Bahadur.

Bahadur merely waved his hand. “Go, meet with Hannibal. I know he will be pleased to see you.”

Not wishing to push the conversation into awkwardness, Will took his leave and walked through the main archway of the building. He’d only ever been in the living quarters and once where they dined, but never out back on their training ground. Luckily the halls weren’t overly difficult to navigate and soon the unmistakable clamor of swords reached his ears. He smiled and moved towards the sound.

“Will?”

Stalled, Will turned and saw Firuz hesitantly watching him from a doorway, looking for all the world like he was concerned about overstepping some sort of unspoken boundary. That was ridiculous, of course. Will was the guest here, not the other way around. As though trying to express this without so many words, Will turned fully to face the other man and smiled. “Firuz! Hello.”

A look that was terribly similar to relief swept over Firuz’s face and he relaxed. “It is good to see you.”

Surprised and pleased by the comment, Will’s smile widened. “Some time has passed since I last spoke to you.” He wracked his brain to remember the contents of their last meeting. Oh,

right. “Is your brother doing well?”

Finally, Firuz matched Will’s smile. “That’s what I wanted to speak to you about. The root you brought did wonders for him. After some days, he began to eat more heartily than I have seen in some time.”

The healer inside Will preened with pride. “I’m pleased to hear that.”

Firuz clasped his elbows gawkily. “Could I trouble you for a bit more of it, perhaps? I’ve checked the markets, but most traders here won’t sell to us.” He shrugged as though it couldn’t be helped, completely missing the flash of rage in Will’s eyes. “He’s doing better, but—”

“It’s no trouble,” Will said quickly, saving Firuz from humiliating himself with begging. “I would be more than happy to bring you more.”

Firuz was the picture of gratitude. “Thank you.”

Will should have left it there. Truly, he should have, but he found himself incapable of letting it pass. “The traders refuse to sell to you?”

Firuz grinned and shook his head as though Will had made some clever jest. “You’re so kind that this still surprises you.”

Will flushed. “Or naïve, I suppose.”

A small headshake in the negative. “Kind.” With one final smile, Firuz left before Will could make any further a fool of himself.

Sighing, Will reached the back and the sight of men in various states of undress blurred into focus. Will did his best not to gape at the scene as he stepped onto the dirt, keeping his back to the wall.

The mercenaries of the auxilia were, for the most part, devoid of their armor, but no training blade could be seen to balance out the lack of protection. Every one of them wielded the same blades they carried into battle and they were lunging and swiping at one another with none of the strict caution that one would find on Roman training grounds. Their bodies curved gracefully with each swing of their blades. Every dodge was executed with the beauty of a dance. Blades came so close to skin that Will could practically taste the metal.

So mesmerized was he by the scene that he failed to notice Hannibal approaching him until the man was completely upon him, leaning over to whisper in his ear.

“This is a pleasant surprise.”

It took every sliver of Will’s self-control not to jump. From the smirk on Hannibal’s lips, he likely failed. His eyes remained on the hypnotic movements of the warriors in front of him. He could hear the music of their battles; feel it rattling the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet. “They’re not in armor.”

Hannibal made a noise low in his throat and leaned against the wall at Will's side. "They are merely keeping themselves limber. Enjoying the evening air."

"This is not training?"

"Of course it is."

Will's brows furrowed as he tried to understand.

Hannibal must have caught his expression because a dry chuckle echoed into the night. "You Romans and your stiff regulations." Had someone else said the words, it would have easily come across as an insult. Somehow, Hannibal managed to make it sound affectionate. "Are you so accustomed to the rigors of your own training that you marvel so at ours? The human body is far more useful when unencumbered."

"I can understand that," Will muttered, wincing as one of the men narrowly missed having his belly sliced open by his opponent. The man appeared thrilled at the near-miss, rather than perturbed. His teeth glinted with a grin. "But they're using real swords."

"It holds their focus." Hannibal inspected Will's face curiously. "Are you concerned as a medic?" He gestured out towards the men. "Do you see so much as a drop of blood?"

Will swallowed thickly and shook his head. "No, I do not."

Hannibal smiled. "Then cease your worrying. You'll drive yourself to madness."

"I'm quite certain I've already made my way there." Will breathed deeply when he felt Hannibal's knuckles gently tap his own. "Nothing for it."

"Do you wish to go elsewhere and speak?"

Finally, Will turned and looked up at Hannibal's face. The man's expression was patient and inquisitive. It was a common look for him. "I cannot stay for long."

Nothing in Hannibal's mien betrayed disappointment. All he offered was a quick nod and enduring persistence. "Surely enough time for conversation."

"Enough for that, yes."

"Come." Hannibal pushed away from the wall and waved one of his men over. The man jogged up to the two of them, not sparing Will so much as a glance, and waited for Hannibal's word. Hannibal said something to him in Persian and pointed at the men still training. With a nod, the soldier confirmed the command and set off back into the dirt. Satisfied, Hannibal guided Will back inside the barracks.

"What did you say to him?"

There was a fleeting pause in which Hannibal seemed to forget that Will could not speak Persian. "I told him to ensure they don't remain for much longer and that they eat properly

before sleep. I've no doubt I would find many of them remaining where we left them when the stars are high and bright in the sky, had I not said as much to him."

Will allowed himself a moment to admire the wild nature of the men of the auxilia. Their prowess in battle was like nothing he had ever seen. In moments like this, where he witnessed how freely they threw their bodies to the sword, such skill didn't surprise him in the slightest.

They pushed into Hannibal's quarters and Hannibal wasted no time in divesting himself of his tunic, back turned to the young legionary following behind him.

Will felt, as he always did, humbled by the amount of trust Hannibal put in him. Honored.

Hannibal rolled his shoulders and tossed the tunic on the stool by the window. "Would you be so kind as to remove my bandages? I am told by my own medics that I should be allowing the wound air."

"They've told you correctly." Will stepped forward without hesitation and settled his hands gently on Hannibal's shoulders. Blinking slowly, his eyes traced the lines of the k̲ālkubi that adorned the copper skin. Moving before Hannibal could question his hesitation, Will began to unwrap the cloth. He made a noise of approval as the gash was revealed to him. It was healing well—almost beautifully so. "You are very lucky."

Hannibal twisted around and brushed his thumbs over Will's cheekbones. "Merely lucky I had you to tend to me."

"Don't ply me with compliments. It was my doing that got you the wound to begin with," Will scoffed, bandages hanging from his fingertips. Despite the retort, he leaned up on his toes and pressed his lips to Hannibal's in a chaste kiss. Their skin stuck together in places when they pulled apart and Will licked his lips as he settled back down on his heels.

"You've got an interesting mood about you tonight," Hannibal commented with sparkling eyes. He let his hands fall back as Will turned to get rid of the bandage.

Will didn't bother denying it. Instead, he hopped up onto Hannibal's bed, pressing his back to the wall and gesturing between his splayed thighs. "Lay with me?"

Looking more intrigued and humored than anything, Hannibal complied with the request, laying carefully back on the bed until his head rested on Will's stomach and his arms bracketed the smaller man's thighs. His feet hung off the edge of the bed, but he didn't seem to mind.

Will felt a savage tug at the chords of his heart and he smiled through it, reaching down to delicately trail his fingertips over Hannibal's brow and down his hairline. Hannibal shut his eyes with contentment and Will followed suit, soaking in the feeling of Hannibal's weight against him, the warmth of his skin, the earthy scent of him.

Will had honestly been intending to talk about the day, but words had suddenly fallen short on the tip of his tongue, sinking into his taste buds like the sticky sweetness of the plum Jove had given him earlier. They breathed together in tandem, absorbing each other's presence and

letting the company seep into their bones. Will's fingers were tracing idle patterns on Hannibal's collarbones, his shoulders, his chin. Hannibal allowed it all, his own palms resting just below Will's knees.

It was a long while before Will spoke. When he did, he wished immediately that he hadn't. His voice broke the peace with what felt like a shatter. "We are to send the men of the fourth to Damascus tomorrow."

Hannibal's hands flexed against Will's legs, but he did not open his eyes. "Far sooner than I had anticipated."

"Yet you anticipated correctly."

"I wish it weren't so."

Will ran a digit over Hannibal's lower lip and the finger received a kiss for its troubles. He felt want stirring in his gut and resolutely pushed it away. He had been serious when he told Hannibal he couldn't stay for long. They were seeing the cohort off in the morning. There would be much to do before the sun had so much as risen. "When my superior questioned the order, Caeso all but threatened him with me as the weapon."

At this, Hannibal did open his eyes, peering up at Will from his position. "What do you mean?"

"He told him that he would give me the job if Orion did not wish to perform it."

Hannibal's lips twitched in an aborted frown. "That seems terribly heavy-handed for a man like Caeso."

Will's stomach roiled and he sighed, letting his head fall back with a thud against the wall. "It was. It was unlike him. I fear Laurentinus has said more to him than I realized."

"That is not only likely, but probable."

"In addition, a friend of mine, Jove," Will resumed his ministrations, rubbing his thumbs along Hannibal's shoulder blades. He needed to keep his hands occupied, moving, distracted. "Has been tasked to take a section of the cavalry to intercept and escort the emperor's caravan."

Hannibal grunted and it was a distinctly unimpressed sound. "I will be well and truly relieved when the man arrives and all of these 'preparations' cease."

Will raised his brows at the comment. It was unusual for Hannibal to be so fractious, but it wasn't as though Will disagreed. He said as much. "I second the sentiment. Do you really think, though, that things will change once he's here?"

"Undoubtedly," came the easy reply. "He will likely make some rousing speeches upon arrival, perhaps. Afterwards, we will see neither hide nor hair of him for great stints of time. He will remain housed and out of the fray, as most men of power tend to do. We will only see him during matters of great import."

“This is your prediction, is it?” Will murmured teasingly. “How can you be so certain he won’t flaunt himself?”

Hannibal snickered and the sound made Will want to keep teasing him. “He is a diplomat. The military men flaunt their vitality to be admired. The leaders interact with the people to be loved. The diplomats hide in their houses and poke their heads out if something curious happens.”

“He is meant to be our leader,” Will pointed out unnecessarily.

“Those who rule men are meant to be many things. Rarely are they any of them.”

Will couldn’t find it in himself to counter the statement and so he let the conversation wither back into companionable silence. Hannibal had taken to rolling his thumbs into Will’s calves, an approximation of a massage. For a while, Will let himself enjoy it.

Eventually, he spoke again. “Most of those men will die on their journey to Damascus. As I spoke with them, it seemed they already knew as much.”

“Soldiers, beyond most men, can smell death in the wind.”

“But to accept it?”

“What choice do they have?”

Will’s mouth opened and closed again, each response swimming to the forefront of his mind less productive than the last.

Hannibal sighed and reached up to cup Will’s cheek, forcing his gaze down to meet his own. “Let them have their dignity, Will. They do not want your pity.”

“It’s not pity, it’s—” Will bit his lip and broke the eye contact to glare out the window.

“What is it?”

“Indignation,” Will spat. “Disbelief.”

Hannibal thought on his words, hand still holding Will’s cheek from what must have been an uncomfortable angle where he lay. He let the hand fall and Will caught himself leaning forward to follow it. “The asperity of the situation is not to be trifled with,” were Hannibal’s subsequent words. “But you would do not to let those men witness your frustration. Let them walk from this with heads held high, for they have no other option but to do so.”

Will groaned and traced his fingers over one of the black swirls decorating Hannibal’s chest. “I have never been so vexed by the lack of choice we are afforded as soldiers as I have in recent months.”

“Perhaps you were always vexed, but hadn’t the confidence to recognize it.”

Will considered the thought. “You’re often right. Undeniably, you are about this as well.”

Hannibal's hands returned to their place on Will's legs, stroking the skin there. "It is not my goal to be right. Only helpful."

"One and the same."

"Maybe so." Hannibal entertained himself by drawing invisible eddies with his fingers on Will's shins for a moment before his hands stuttered and he shifted a bit. "Would you like to resume training?"

"Training?" Will spoke the word as though he had forgotten its meaning entirely. He had, it seemed, as his mind raced to comprehend the question.

Hannibal spoke before Will could bemuse himself further. "On our travels before Antioch, I had begun to train you."

"Oh!" Will shut his eyes and felt like he was flushing from head to toe. "I am an idiot." A sharp, playful smack to his thigh reopened his eyes and he shoved Hannibal's shoulder lightly in reprisal. "Stop that."

"Stop insulting yourself, my dear Will, and I will happily oblige."

Will puffed his lips out and aimed to look unimpressed. "Right. You wish to resume training?"

"My wish is to know if *you* would like to. I would be more than happy to," Hannibal replied effortlessly. "Circumstantially, you have made yourself known with my men. They have, by and large, accepted your presence here. I've no doubt many of them would be eager to show a Roman their skills."

Blanching, Will couldn't stop the grimace that came. "I'm not sure how comfortable I am with allowing them to swing swords at me while bare-chested."

With a laugh, Hannibal reached back and slid his palms up Will's chest firmly. The touch was a possessive one. "As much as I enjoy the image, that's unlikely to happen. They may be enthusiastic, but they recognize that their training is different from your own. I would ensure that this fact would be taken into consideration. Knowing how to combat Persian swordsmanship will no doubt prove useful in the battles to come."

"Not all of them fight as Persians," Will argued.

At that, Hannibal looked genuinely surprised. So much so that he levered himself up in a sitting position and turned to face Will directly. "I was not aware you recognized the difference."

Rather than take an offense that was not meant to be given, Will allowed himself to hear the words at face value. "I don't, specifically. I can tell there are different origins in some of your men's styles, but mostly I know they do not all fight as Persians because not all of them are Persian."

Hannibal's lips curved. "Most of your people cannot tell the difference."

Will turned his palms upwards and gestured somewhat feebly. “Neither could I, at first. I’ve spent enough time here to know now, of course. I’ve noticed the differences. Heard them speaking. I won’t claim to know where all your men are from, but I know with very little doubt that the sole origin of your complement is not Persian. And even those who are were not necessarily raised in Persia, were they? Firuz, for example.”

Hannibal was wearing the look he always had when Will had done something unexpected and pleasing. It was a look that said he wanted to devour the young man before him. “Firuz was raised in Rome, yes. I had no idea you knew this.”

Will felt slightly victorious and he took a moment to understand why.

For once, Hannibal wasn’t the one who knew everything about Will. As much as Will felt comforted by Hannibal reading him so easily—knowing him—it was liberating to know that he was not omniscient and Will was capable of blindsiding him. It was a good feeling. “I have spoken to him on a few occasions.” He sucked his lower lip between his teeth and considered his options for a moment.

Would it really be so bad to start training again? Yes, he was intimidated by the prospect of going up against anyone in the militia, but the rational part of his brain told him that none of them would dare do anything to hurt him. The worst that could happen would be that he might entirely make a fool out of himself. But it would be worth it, wouldn’t it? Hannibal was right. They were about to face a talented and determined enemy. Will had seen skilled warriors in the past from many lands. He had seen brutality and he had seen cunning, but the wounds the Persians inflicted were efficient, deadly, and precise. The fourth cohort was a disturbing example of their skill.

“Alright,” Will said. “If you’ll have me, I will train with you.”

Hannibal’s smile showed the tips of his teeth and a strand of black hair fell over his cheek. “I would always have you, Will.”

Will let out a quick breath of satisfaction and allowed Hannibal to kiss him. It was slow and sweet and full of promises that Will wished desperately he could see through to the end. They pulled apart and rested their foreheads together, sharing air for a moment longer.

“Shall I start tomorrow?” Will whispered, not wanting to disturb the relaxed haze that had slipped into the room. “After we see off the cohort?”

Hannibal placed a small kiss on Will’s forehead and leaned back completely. “Whenever you would like to begin, you will be welcome.”

“Tomorrow, then.” That settled, Will rose from the bed and smiled down at Hannibal. “Until then.”

The smile returned was tame and tired. “Rest well, Will.”

Will kept to himself on the way back to his own barracks, head down and feet moving quickly to carry him forward. Few were on the streets now that night had truly fallen, but he

didn’t want to risk getting caught off-guard again.

He wasn’t certain why he had neglected to tell Hannibal about the encounter in the market. The men had recognized him, which seemed impossible in hindsight. There were hundreds of soldiers in Antioch at that moment in time. How was it that the commoners had managed to identify him out of the swarm? It was possible one of the nobles had spoken about the event, but even with their story, Will was not spectacularly unique. He looked as any other young Roman. Brown hair, strong jaw, pale skin. He was indistinguishable.

How many young legionaries had those men pulled aside before they had happened upon Will? Had it been a lucky guess on their part? Surely Will would have heard reports had they done that to anyone else. Then again, the legionaries may have been too embarrassed to admit they had been harassed by simple townsfolk.

Will didn’t blame them if that was the case. He wasn’t exactly feeling prideful about the encounter himself.

Will gave up on trying to discern how they had discovered him and committed to hoping that they were only a few in a thousand. The possibility of coincidence was the only thing that would keep Will sane when there were still so many unanswered questions.

Hannibal didn’t need to know what happened. It was a fluke.

The town was tense and afraid. People were bound to lash out every now and then. It would resolve itself. They would forget and move on when their anger cooled.

All Will had to do was keep his head down and his gait focused and no one would bother him again. If anything, his outburst when confronted had made the men think twice about threatening him again. He just had to make it until emperor Severus arrived in Antioch. Once he was present, the people would be distracted enough to let the water flow undisturbed.

All Will had to do was wait.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you so much for all your comments. Every comment means the world to me. Things in this story are going to start getting eventful pretty soon after I sufficiently drench you all in copious amounts of foreshadowing, so prepare yourselves.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“Fear drives men to do terrible, reckless things.”

Chapter Notes

I'm terribly sorry for the wait on this chapter. Hopefully this chapter is exciting enough to make up for the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite the impediment of missing one of his limbs, Marcellus was an irreplaceable help to Will and Orion the morning that the cohort was to be sent to Damascus. He served as a soothing balm to the younger soldiers fraught with nerves or those too far injured to be coherent. With the assistance of a brace and cane, he hopped from bed to bed, murmuring quiet words to his men and bolstering their confidence regarding the coming journey.

Will marveled at him. Here was a man in such immense pain, short a leg and lacking in evidence that their trip to Damascus would end in anything other than disease and death, and he had resolved to bring as much peace to those around him as he could muster.

One of their own medicus in training had agreed—after an unexpected permission granted by Caeso—to accompany the cohort. The young man’s name was Cicero and he was a stocky, grim-faced boy; nothing like the naïve exuberance of Augustus. There was a steadfast honor to him when he proposed he leave with the doomed soldiers, dooming his own fate in turn. Will had seen the fall in Caeso’s face when the boy had made the request. Who could turn down something so noble? Surely not them.

Will used Marcellus and Cicero’s strength to encourage his own. He threw himself into the preparations for the caravan. Packed an abundance of supplies, left detailed notes with Cicero on the ailments of his party and how best to tend them, and urged Valerian before the sun had even risen to check with the stables on the condition of the horses they were able to spare—which were a regrettably sparse few.

When everything was as satisfactory as it could be in such a situation, Will found himself pacing between the barracks and the caravan, helping injured men into carts and looking utterly useless when he wasn’t. He’d run his hand through his hair so many times it was on end and he could feel the dark circles under his eyes.

Eventually, his frenetic movements were cut to a halt by a hand on his arm. Startled out of his mania, Will turned to see Orion looking more exhausted than he ever had.

“Cease your storming, Will,” he said tiredly. “There’s nothing left to be done but see them off.”

Will was half tempted to acknowledge that Orion had neglected to use his full name, something the man never did, but the sense of defeat hanging in the air held his tongue. “And yet I feel we have not done enough.”

Orion made a sound of agreement low in his throat. “The only way we could do more is to keep them here, which you know we cannot do.”

“There is a difference between cannot and will not.”

“Not for a soldier.”

Will sighed, shoulders sagging. “Yes. Quite.”

They were silent for a stretch, watching as the last of the damaged cohort prepared for their departure. Ultimately, Orion broke the silence with a bizarre statement.

“I am almost done, I should think.”

Will frowned. “I’m sorry?”

The older man shrugged and then shook his head. “I would speak with you alone when this is over and done with. Do me the courtesy.”

To say that Will was perplexed by the odd request would be a gentle term, but he nodded regardless and forced on a weak smile. “Of course, Orion. Where?”

“The medical barracks is as good a place as any. After all, it will be empty now.” There was a bitter bite to the words.

Will’s stomach sank. “Yes. Alright, I’ll meet you there.”

“Good.” Orion pointed towards one of the carts. “You developed a bond with that one there, did you not? Best bid him farewell.” With that, Orion was off, likely to bludgeon instructions into Cicero’s head one last time.

Will turned in the direction Orion had pointed and saw Marcellus in one of the carts, wedged between a sack of food and another soldier. With a churning feeling in his gut, he made his way over to him. Upon seeing Will’s approach, Marcellus nodded.

“Seeing me off, then?”

“Something like that.”

Marcellus nodded again and winced when the cart was jostled. “You’re letting that boy come with us.” He gazed over at Cicero who was nodding stonily as Orion instructed him.

Will crossed his arms over his chest like he could protect himself from the situation by holding them close. “It is his decision.”

“A foolish decision.”

“An honorable one.”

“One and the same, sometimes.”

Will smiled. “It has been a privilege to know you, Marcellus.”

Marcellus frowned and reached over the side of the cart, slapping lightly at Will’s arm. “I refuse to die. Don’t speak to me like I must.”

Will raised a challenging eyebrow. “And yet it was you who claimed he would not make it to another summer.”

“Summer is even more distant than Damascus. I will see these men through to there, at the very least.”

“Good.” Will nodded. “I see how you are with them. They need you.”

Marcellus pursed his lips. “They need me to remind them that they need only themselves. It is their own strength that will see them through this journey.”

“You do realize that makes little sense?”

Marcellus almost smiled. Will was glad he didn’t. It would have seemed too final. Too bittersweet.

They said nothing else to one another. Not as those who could walk mounted their horses or took to the road. Not as Will and Orion and Caeso and those willing to watch the travesty that was their departure walked them to the gates and saw to their leave. Not even as the carts disappeared over the hills and Will was left to his own misery that was his feeling of inadequacy—of incapability.

As everyone made their way back into the city, Will remained outside the gates, staring off in the direction that the cohort had left. Somewhere over that stretch of unforgiving tundra was Damascus. He prayed that Damascus would see them arrive whole.

A throat cleared and Will turned to find the source. It was Caeso, standing uncomfortably off to the back of him and looking for all the world like he wanted to walk away. Will felt an unwelcome swell of bitterness in his throat and suppressed it quickly, but Caeso must have seen the struggle on his face.

“You blame me for this.”

“No.”

Caeso laughed but it wasn’t out of humor. Taking a few halting steps forward, he stopped at Will’s side. “No? Perhaps I haven’t known you for the better part of my life then, if I can so easily mistake your expressions.”

Will sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. “I want to blame you because it would be easier.” An apologetic shrug. “But I do not, Caeso. Truly. I—” He hesitated, bit his lip, looked out over the hills. “I wish you would tell me everything. I know I have no right to ask.”

There was a silence as Caeso mulled over his words. “You may not have a right to answers, but you have a right to ask for them of me. We are brothers, you and I.”

“Then tell me.”

“In truth, I don’t know what I *can* tell you.”

Will frowned. “Is the situation truly so confused?”

Caeso fixed him with a withering look. “You’re standing here beside me in this mess, are you not? What a silly question.” He looked around, then, as though searching for prying eyes and ears. They were far enough away from the gates that their words would not carry. The guards seemed disinterested in them and the farms were off to the east. “You mustn’t repeat it. Anything I say.”

Will waited until his eyes caught his companion’s and he held the gaze firm. “You have my word. You needn’t even ask for it to begin with.”

“It is a time for caution,” Caeso offered back feebly. Then, he huffed out a breath and steeled himself. For what, Will didn’t know.

“You’re making me nervous.”

“Don’t be. Although I fear what you will think of me.”

Will didn’t know what to say to that—couldn’t possibly envision the words that would truly earn any ire towards Caeso. The fact that Caeso thought it possible made him extraordinarily uncomfortable. “Speak it quickly then before your tongue turns to stone.”

Caeso snorted at the childish saying before doing just as Will told him. “Laurentinus has put a challenge to me. If I do everything as he asks and achieve commendable results, he wishes to promote me to take charge of the emperor’s guard upon his arrival.”

Will blinked. “I—what?”

Caeso held up his hands like he hoped an explanation would fall from the sky. “It is implied that the current head of the guard is performing unfavorably. Laurentinus requires someone, as he tells me, trustworthy. With emperor Severus’ particular disinclination towards military

means, there is tension." He bit the inside of his cheek and looked away. It was the countenance of a man who feared retribution for his words.

It was that look that made Will understand. "He wants someone in charge of the guard that will foresee a mutiny and put a stop to it."

"Among other things," Caeso agreed quietly.

"And do you wish for such a duty?"

Caeso appeared perplexed by the question. "My wishes are irrelevant."

Will rolled his eyes and turned away to glare down the road. "They are not."

"They are to Laurentinus. If I fail to prove myself in this, Will, it does not only speak of my lack of promotion, but in all likelihood the loss of my current station." Caeso placed a hand on Will's shoulder, pressing and imploring look his way. "What I wish does not matter."

"He would take the cohort from you?" Will replied in horror. "You have done nothing worthy of such—"

Caeso shook his head, silencing the protestations. "It does not matter. Either way, I will lose the cohort. Whether or not it is while gaining favor or losing it is all that remains to be determined."

Will's teeth grit together so hard it hurt. "He has trapped you."

Caeso let his hand fall. "Maybe so, but there is nothing for it now."

The rage was bubbling up inside Will's chest and making his vision go blurry. The indignation he felt was palpable. "Is that all we are doomed for? Forced complacency regarding our fates?"

For the longest moment, Caeso's eyes searched Will's face. Eventually, they settled. "I've always known this bothers you, but you have been far more vocal as of late."

The warning was clear and made Will balk. He reigned himself in as much as he could manage. "Perhaps I am tired of staying silent."

"Perhaps someone is influencing you."

"What are you implying?"

Caeso looked crestfallen by Will's defensiveness and sighed heavily, hanging his head. "I— forgive me if that sounded as an accusation. It wasn't my intention."

Will grimaced. "It did come across that way, yes."

"Your thoughts and opinions have always been beyond that of your station." Caeso held up a hand as Will moved to protest. "And I say that with admiration, not admonishment. My

concern is simply that your newfound desire to express these beliefs could lead you into trouble."

"Should I have my lips sewn then?" Will knew his anger was directed unjustly towards his friend, but it was there all the same. "I am damned tired of everyone telling me to bite my tongue."

Caeso's expression softened fondly. "If so many people are telling you this, it simply shows how many people love you, Will. I don't know how I would manage without you. I can't stand the idea of politics taking you from me."

"Politics." Will snorted. "What an awful way to go."

Caeso chuckled almost involuntarily, cheeks reddening. "I now have an image of diplomats waving spears and talking very sternly about the empire."

Will let out a breathy laugh. "A true horror."

Caeso smiled and reached out to squeeze Will's shoulders. "Let us set aside this discussion for now. The day is already a burdened one. Let's not make it harder."

With a nod, Will clapped the other man genially along the ribs and stepped back. "All of us should eat together soon. It's been too long. I feel as though the city has separated us despite living within the same walls."

"I couldn't agree more. We'll make it happen."

Will smiled and glanced back towards the city. "I promised Orion I'd meet him after we sent off the caravan. He's not fond of waiting."

Caeso waved him away. "Do not make him wait, then."

Will gave Caeso a lingering look, trying his best to imagine his friend alongside the emperor in servitude. The image obstinately refused to manifest in his mind's eye. With one last smile, he turned back to Antioch and made his return to the barracks.

Orion was sitting upon a stool in the center of the barracks. The smell of sick and decay was still lingering in the air, accompanied by an eerie hollowness that made the atmosphere more disconcerting than it had already become. Upon seeing Will, the medicus nodded and pointed to a stool across the room. Will dutifully grabbed it and dragged it over, sitting across from Orion and wondering whether dread or curiosity would be more appropriate for this conversation.

Orion didn't make him wait long.

"I have submitted my intent to retire."

Will blinked.

Orion gave him a cross look and rolled his eyes. “Did you hear me, boy? This is my last war. I’m accepting my right to land should I survive it.”

“I can’t…” Will licked his lips and swallowed. “I can’t imagine you on a farm.” To his surprise, Orion barked out a laugh.

“Good. I abhor farms. I can take land outside of Rome. I’ve served long enough to be warranted a place near the city.”

Will nodded dumbly, thinking on the news. He wasn’t entirely certain why he was so surprised. Orion was not a young man. His retirement from the service of the empire had been looming over the horizon for quite some time now. “I appreciate you telling me.”

“This isn’t simply a courtesy, Willhelm. You will be my successor, after all.”

Will’s eyebrows rose. “That isn’t—”

“It is. There is no question as to who will be promoted in my stead.” Orion frowned and gave Will a critical look. “Did you truly believe that was undecided?”

Will shrugged helplessly. “I suppose I didn’t wish to presume—”

“Presume?” Orion interrupted him once more. “Boy, why would I have been training you all this time as my second if it were not to have you replace me? Your abandonment of simple logic is baffling.”

Will flushed. When it was put like that, he felt foolish for ever having doubted his promotion. “I hadn’t put much consideration towards it.”

“You best do so now. This war must end eventually. When it does, you must be prepared to take my place.”

“I’m already prepared,” Will murmured thoughtlessly, chewing the inside of his cheek as he lost himself in his own thoughts. His preoccupation left him entirely ignorant of the glare Orion shot his way. It took him a moment to realize himself and he backtracked quickly, eyes wide. “What I mean to say is that you have prepared me well in your teachings. Forgive me.”

Orion shook his head and stood. “Breathe. I’ve dealt with your ramblings long enough to be able to translate them.” He began waving Will away as though banishing his mere presence. “Now go. I simply wanted to inform you that the petition to retire has been accepted. Nothing more is required of you today as I believe you have done quite enough already.” He began walking away before Will could even respond, his gruff voice carrying behind him as he scuttled off. “Go have the day to yourself.”

Baffled, Will called uselessly after him. “Thank you!” He didn’t get so much as a grumble in response and so he sat there on his stool dumbly, stranded in the middle of an empty room with far too little sleep and far too many thoughts to keep his mind in any proper semblance of order.

Perhaps sleep was a good idea. Afterwards, he could pay a visit to Hannibal and begin their training anew as they had agreed upon the night prior. It was that thought the motivated Will to shake off his stupor and find his way to a bed. Sleep and then Hannibal. Sounded like as good a way to spend his day as any.

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Will was panicking and Hannibal was staring at him in dubious confusion.

“Is this not what we had discussed?” Hannibal enquired placidly.

Will ran a hand through his shaggy hair and shrugged. “Well, yes, it is. But—”

Hannibal raised a silencing hand. “Then I beg of you to calm your nerves. My men will not harm you.”

After some much-needed rest, Will had found his way to the auxilia appointments to take Hannibal up on their agreement to start training again. With battle looming like a mythical beast over the horizon, it was a wise move to learn new tactics. Unlike his fellow legionaries, Will was never satisfied in knowing but one aspect of something. The hearty endurance of Roman maneuvers served its purpose, but why rely solely upon it when there was an option to expand his mind, his knowledge, his skills? To avoid such an opportunity would be irresponsible, in Will’s honest opinion.

Only he had forgotten that during their agreement Hannibal had mentioned sparring with the men of the auxilia. It was logical, certainly, for Will to train with men other than Hannibal. He’d trained with hundreds of Roman men over the years. The problem was that here he was entirely out of his element. Where he trusted Hannibal not to judge his ignorance, he feared the men of the auxilia would not be so forgiving of his shortcomings.

He did not speak their languages. He had no knowledge of their skills. He didn’t even know what their swords were called, for they surely weren’t gladiuses by any stretch of the imagination.

Groaning, Will rubbed at his face and attempted to rub his hesitance away simultaneously.

“What are your reservations?” Hannibal was patient as ever.

“They’ll know,” Will muttered under his breath, not letting himself meet Hannibal’s inquisitive gaze.

“Know what?”

“That I don’t belong here.”

Hannibal’s mouth twitched into a frown. He looked genuinely surprised and for a moment he said nothing.

Will felt unbearably childish and rubbed at his arms like he did as a boy.

Then, Hannibal smiled in an off-kilter sort of way, shook his head, and placed a warm hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Perhaps the fact that I left my homeland has given me this perspective, but I do not believe any one man belongs anywhere other than where he is. Up until now, my men have welcomed you quite unreservedly past their boundaries. What is it you fear, Will? That when they see you fight they will suddenly recognize you as foreign? We are all foreign here."

Will's shoulders slumped. "You're right. I know you're right."

Hannibal continued to smile and gently pushed Will towards where the men were training. "No one will expect you to know that which you received no training in. I cannot say, however, that they will gentle you. I would be disappointed if they did."

"Well I am a soldier." Will gave in and began walking in the direction of Hannibal's steering. "It's not as though I've never held a sword."

"Have you? I was convinced you had forgotten that entirely for a moment."

Will's mouth gaped at the tease and he shot a look back over his shoulder.

Hannibal just raised a brow and gestured for him to carry on without him.

Torn between laughing and vomiting from nerves, Will sighed and approached the man Hannibal had indicated before the momentary strike of anxiety. He could barely contain his breath of relief when he saw Bahadur was standing beside him.

"Will!"

Will grinned. "Bahadur." His cheeks flushed when Bahadur gave him an odd look. Apparently his smile had been a touch too enthusiastic without context. "Sorry, I'm just a bit nervous. I'm pleased to see you here."

"Nervous?" Bahadur repeated. "Whatever for?"

"I promise to not cut any important bits," the man beside them said. He beamed and put his hands on his hips. He was a large man, skin almost as dark as the night sky, and his teeth shone in the sunlight. His head was smooth and gleaming and dripping with sweat. He must have been out here for some time already. His accent was thick and of a nature Will had never heard before. "I am Tadesse. Today, I teach you."

Will swallowed, intimidated by the sheer bulk of the man in front of him. "I am Will. It is good to meet you, Tadesse."

"I know who you are," Tadesse replied. Then, he laughed—a loud and uproarious thing. "A Roman who can say my name. A wonder."

Will's eyebrows rose and he spoke before he could think better of it. "Romans find your name difficult? But why?"

Tadesse shook his head. “I have no idea. They have names like Iovianus and—” he gestured vaguely towards the city. “Laurentinus. But they cannot say Tadesse. This is strange place.”

Will felt a bizarre secondhand embarrassment on behalf of his countrymen. He shook it off and decided to change the subject. “I will be training with you?”

“Yes. Come.” Tadesse began to walk away before stopping short and pointing back at the rack holding training swords. “Take one. Then come.”

With an anxious twist of his gut, Will sighed and grabbed one of the blades off the rack. They were dulled and blunt, but they would still do a fair bit of damage when swung by a confident hand. It was curved and angled strangely—like nothing Will had ever used. The gladiuses of the legion were straight and just long enough to carry weight without dragging the arm down like a stone. A gladius was a sword made to go with a shield, to travel easy, to see the whites of the eyes of the man you killed.

But this sword?

Will turned it over in his palm, examining the sweep of the blade. “What is this called?”

Tadesse looked at him curiously, at the blade, and back at Will. “Sword.”

Will winced, unsure of how to explain what he was asking. “Yes, of course. What I mean—” He was saved further discomfiture when Bahadur placed a hand on his shoulder.

“It is called a talwar.”

Will rolled the word around on his tongue, hesitating. “Once more?”

Bahadur smiled. “Talwar.”

“Talwar. Alright.” Will licked his lips and tested the weight of the blade. It wobbled awkwardly against the twist of his wrist. Lighter than a gladius, but odd and unfamiliar. “Why is it curved? Yours isn’t.” He indicated the sword hanging from the scabbard at the other man’s hip.

Bahadur shrugged and unsheathed his blade, holding it up for Will to examine. “My blade is from my homeland. You see the grip? The divot is to hold my fingers in place should I draw from horseback. The curve of the talwar is easier to handle, though it may be strange at first. It is light and quick, something a man of your size could benefit from.” He smiled to show no offense was meant in the comment.

Will hummed and looked back at the blade in his hand. He wasn’t foolish or proud enough to say he was a large man like Cimon or stocky like Lucas. He knew he was smaller than some and such a build had served him well as a combat medic. It helped to weave in and out of battle unnoticed if you were, in fact, unnoticeable. He looked up to see Tadesse waiting patiently and blushed, nodding his gratitude to Bahadur and stepping forward onto the dirt.

“I fear you will be disappointed by my skill with such a blade,” he admitted as Tadesse readied his own sword.

A grin. “Every man must learn.”

Relieved his opponent—his trainer, he supposed—had no expectations, Will readied his stance. No sooner had he planted his feet than Tadesse was swinging at him. Will barely had time to clumsily knock the blade away with a sharp clang of metal before he stumbled backwards and landed firmly on his rear.

Laughing, Tadesse hauled him back to his feet. “This is the problem with Romans. They try to fight the river as stones.”

Brow furrowed, all Will could do was frown in confusion, but his companion didn’t make him wait for an explanation.

“You stand as though rooted. A tree. You cannot fight as a tree,” Tadesse informed him. All the while he was moving. Kicking one of Will’s feet back, shoving at his back to change his posture, jerking his arm around to alter his grip. “Unless it is to take a beating. Trees can take many blows before falling.” He held up a finger and caught Will’s eye. “Trees cannot fight. Only fall.”

Chewing his cheek, Will tried to parse through the words. “I think I understand.”

“Show me.”

And Tadesse was after him again; swinging, relentless, smooth movements and enduring speed. He ceased when Will needed to catch his breath. The legionary had fallen four more times, leaving his dignity in the dirt. His wrist ached from each time he’d managed to block a blow.

“I do not know how to hold this,” Will confessed. “The front weighs against the grip. I cannot keep it stable.”

Tadesse shook his head and slapped at Will’s forearm. “You have good grip. It is not your grip that is the problem.”

Will was beginning to feel frustrated. He stomped it down. “Then what is?”

Pointing a finger to his own temple, Tadesse replied: “Your mind. You find your center at your feet. Romans teach it is the ground that is holding you. It is not.” He slapped a hand to Will’s stomach and pushed firm. “It is here. You must balance from here. The ground changes. The blade changes. In here,” he pushed against Will’s stomach once more before stepping back. “Does not.”

Sighing, Will tried to do as he was told, but in truth the explanations made little sense to him. “Alright,” he breathed warily. “Again, then.”

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It was hours before Tadesse finally called a halt to their training. Will was bruised and battered. In the end, he had managed to land a few blows himself. Only a slight few, mind you, but they had been blows nonetheless and Will would cling to his victory in them.

Hannibal had vanished somewhere with Bahadur and a few others, leaving Will alone for the first time in recent memory with the men of the auxilia and neither of the men he knew best as a buffer between them. Even Firuz and his brother, Jalil, were nowhere to be seen.

And it was here, amidst strangers and soldiers, that Will found himself sitting alongside Tadesse at a long table as the men had their fill of rations and the evening darkened.

Will chewed the tough meat of his meal slowly. It wasn't chicken, he knew that much, but he hadn't bothered to ask what it was. It was food and he was starving after such a trying afternoon. His muscles ached and his belly was empty and he was content to sit cocooned by the murmur of the men around him as he thought over what Tadesse had taught him.

Words speaking of balance, focus, and harmony with an inner self swirled around in his mind, trying to make sense with the movements he had been shown and ordered to carry out himself. It was nothing like the training in the legion. The legion was rigorous, certainly, but they spoke nothing of motivation and self-awareness. It was all about the enemy and endurance. Outlast your foe. With Tadesse, it seemed to be about outmaneuvering rather than simply outlasting.

Will couldn't deny the appeal.

"You are a good student."

Starting, Will turned to look at Tadesse. The man was smiling one of his never-ending, toothy grins. "You think so?"

Tadesse nodded. "Yes. You are eager for learning. Sharp mind. Sharp sword. All weapons."

Will took a thoughtful swig of his wine. "Where did you learn to fight?"

"Caravans," came the reply. "Many people from my home trade. Many others protect trade. I protected."

"Home? Where is that?"

Tadesse's eyes took on a distant look for the first time that evening, but he quickly recovered and smiled once more. "The kingdom of Aksum. Far from here."

"The Aksumites are traders of ivory, aren't they?" Will struggled to remember what he'd heard of the peoples to the south of Arabia, to the lands west and into the heat and sun. "By the Erythraean sea?" Will hadn't known it was possible for Tadesse's grin to broaden any further.

"You see? A man of learning! A great mind!"

Will blushed crimson and turned back to his plate. Tadesse's enthusiasm made him indisputably affable and Will was torn between fond amusement and tempered embarrassment for the man's obvious lack of qualms. "My father had a great interest in the world. He taught me many things before his passing."

Tadesse's smile fell into something far more somber and he laid a large, heavy hand on Will's back. "His next journey. I am sure he waits for you."

Blinking, Will nodded. "I… thank you."

"My father is on his next journey. My mother." Tadesse sighed. "My sister."

Will's heart ached. "I'm so sorry."

The smile was back, if somewhat subdued. "My people do not believe that death is the end."

"Seems like a good belief for a soldier to have."

"Yes." Tadesse finished his own drink and angled himself to face Will more directly. "So many words in your mind. I can see them in your eyes."

Will contemplated the statement. It was true enough. "There's a lot to think about. A lot happening around us."

Tadesse shrugged. "The world is always happening."

"True enough. Though I find myself wishing sometimes it would slow."

There was a moment where Tadesse seemed to consider this at length, rubbing his forefinger back and forth across his chin in thought. "I was a mercenary for many years. My family left this world and so I left Aksum. Protected traders from many places." He paused to check that Will was listening before he continued. "I have gone to the east until the sea stops me. Seen the empires there. As powerful as the Romans. I have been north until the cold is too great. Seen the tribes there."

Will was listening with rapt fascination. It was like the stories his father had told him as a boy. All tales from others, of course—tales Will had always suspected his father had wished for himself.

"I have been west until the desert sands scrape my skin," Tadesse continued, lips quirked in faded reminiscence. "Seen the kingdoms there. I have seen the world. It does not slow. But that is what makes it worth seeing. Worth living."

"You sound like an explorer," Will said cautiously, not wishing to overstep the bounds of their acquaintanceship. "Not a soldier. Why join the auxilia? Why fight for Rome?"

Tadesse laughed at that. "I do not fight for Rome," he replied, startling Will with the brashness of his honesty. "I fight for Hannibal."

It was Will's turn to chuckle. "He does seem to inspire loyalty, doesn't he?"

A resolute nod. "Hannibal is a good man. He saved my life. I fight for him to repay him."

"I am pleased that he did. I have enjoyed meeting you, Tadesse."

“I like you, Will. I will train you again tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Will had been hoping for at least a day’s rest before trying to combat Tadesse again. Every muscle in his body felt like it was on fire and he was fairly certain his shoulder was bruised black and blue from how many times he had fallen on it. “I was not aware you would wish to resume so quickly.”

Tadesse snorted and stood from the table. “A warrior must train both mind and body. Hannibal asks me to train you. I will train you. Tomorrow.”

Seeing no alternative, Will held back a heavy sigh and nodded. “Tomorrow, then.” As soon as Tadesse was gone, Will groaned and let his forehead thump on the wood of the table, uncaring of the other men still in the hall. An amused huff from behind him made him look up moments later.

Bahadur was staring down at him with his arms crossed, looking endlessly entertained by Will’s exhaustion. “I see that Tadesse has put you through your paces.”

Will rubbed the back of his neck. “He is a talented swordsman. And,” he coughed. “An enthusiastic teacher.”

“Hannibal did well to choose him. Tadesse has more experience than most in the ways of the sword.”

“Yes, he told me of his travels. I can only imagine. Wait—” Will’s mind caught up to what Bahadur had said. “Hannibal chose him to train me? Specifically?”

Bahadur gave him a peculiar look. “Of course. Did you think he would allow just anyone to swing a sword at you? Even from his own men.”

“I…” Will trailed off, uncertain how he felt about the revelation. “I suppose not. Where is he? I haven’t seen him since before the sun went down.”

“Ah.” Bahadur looked back over his shoulder towards the stairs. “We had a meeting with Caeso and his officers to discuss the arrival of the emperor.”

“Oh, Caeso didn’t tell me—” Will hesitated and shook his head. “Forgive me. What reason would he have to tell me? Has Hannibal returned?”

“Indeed. He is up in his quarters.”

Will bit his lip and glanced towards the stairs.

Bahadur shook his head and smiled. “Surely you do not doubt your welcome. Go.” He jerked his head in the direction of the barracks and walked away before Will could say anything more.

Cursing his own reticence, Will made his way up the stairs and down the increasingly familiar path to Hannibal’s rooms. He knocked on the door and Hannibal’s voice beckoned him in from somewhere inside.

Hannibal looked up from the stool by the window. “Will! I am pleased that you decided to see me before you departed.” He continued untying his boots and setting them aside.

Will shut the door behind him and leaned his back against it. There was something simmering in his gut. An irritation, of sorts, that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Naturally, Hannibal noticed his reserve immediately. “And what troubles you?” He continued removing his armor, but his eyes were alert now. Will knew he was listening closely.

“Bahadur told me you selected Tadesse to train me specifically.”

A frown flickered across Hannibal’s face. That was obviously not what he had been expecting to hear. “Of course. Did you find him to be a poor selection?”

Will’s hands shot up defensively and he shook his head. “No! No, not in the slightest. I quite enjoy him, actually. I don’t enjoy the bruises, but—” Will gestured to his arms and dropped his hands back to his sides. “That isn’t what I meant to say.”

“Then I’m afraid you will have to enlighten me,” Hannibal responded calmly, standing to set his chest-piece on the shelf by the wall. “If you found his training useful, why does this trouble you?”

“Bahadur said,” Will shut his eyes and licked his lips. “He said that you wouldn’t let just anyone swing a sword at me.”

“Ah.”

The single syllable was so full of knowing that Will had to look over at the other man in confusion. “Ah?”

“You believe that my selection of Tadesse was coddling.”

Unable to put his discomfort in words before that moment, the realization of the truth of it put Will silent. He nodded helplessly and looked away.

Hannibal made a sound in the back of his throat and sat at the foot of the bed, clasping his hands and looking at Will steadily. “Tell me, was Tadesse gentle in his training? Did he avoid defeating you, doing you damage, or correcting you?”

“No.”

“And did he praise you when you did not merit it, give you breaks that you did not earn, or lack the insistence that you should endure?”

“I…” Will sighed and stared at the floor. “No. He did not.”

“And are you not bruised and weary from a training hard-earned and well spent?”

Will smiled softly, recognizing his own defeat. “Yes, I am. I see your point, Hannibal.”

“Good.” Hannibal clapped his palms together. “For a moment I was concerned that you were hounded by baseless apprehensions.”

Will rolled his eyes and kicked his heel into the floor. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Hannibal stood and joined Will by the door, reaching up to cup his face in strong hands. “You have a particular talent for being a particularly bad liar when it comes to me, it seems.”

Will let the warmth of Hannibal’s palms melt his anxieties away. “I’ve no wish to lie to you.”

“That is good to hear.” Hannibal smiled and leaned down, snaring Will in a gentle kiss. “I’ve no wish to ever hear you lie. Not to me.”

Will stole another kiss before leaning his face into Hannibal’s shoulder and smelling the spice of him, breathing deep. “It seems we are in agreement, then.”

“A conclusion we always come to, yes.”

They stood that way for a moment, Hannibal’s fingers soothing gently through Will’s hair. Eventually, Hannibal stepped back. “Come to bed. You are barely keeping on your feet.”

Will yawned despite his best efforts not to. “I’ve not bathed and I’ve trained all day.”

“There is a basin of water and a cloth on the stand.” Hannibal pointed to the other side of the room. “It’s far too late to go to the baths.” He tugged at the hem of Will’s tunic. “Allow me?”

Will flushed, a different type of anticipation starting to spark in his gut. “Allow you to do what, exactly?” Despite his inquiry, he was already raising his arms and allowing the older man to remove the tunic. They’d had precious little time together since Hannibal had taken him out to the forest.

And *taken him* in that forest.

Hannibal smirked and trailed his fingertips down Will’s pale chest, tracing the ridges of muscle under smooth skin. “Clean you, of course.”

Will hummed and twisted away, sitting down on the bed to remove his boots. He had forgone his armor for the training, knowing full well he would need a better range of movement for it. “Is that all you intend to do with me?”

Will had never been particularly skilled at playing coy, but Hannibal responded to the comment with a deep chuckle as he carried the cloth and basin to the bedside. Then, without further ado, he knelt at Will’s feet, hands gently pressing the Roman’s knees apart so he could settle comfortably between them. With dark eyes, he reached up and pressed his thumb solidly against Will’s lower lip. “No. That is not all I intend.”

Will licked at the digit reflexively, shivering. “Well then.”

Hannibal smirked, a playfulness crinkling the sides of his face and corners of his eyes. He reached into the basin and wrung out the cloth, one hand sliding up Will’s thigh to rest just

under the leg of his shorts and the other wiping away the sweat and dirt of the day along the flat planes of his stomach. “You spend much time out in the sun and you’ll become as dark as me,” he remarked offhandedly. His fingers were idly stroking the outside of Will’s thigh.

Will leaned back on his palms and let his legs splay comfortably. The sight of Hannibal knelt before him, pressed so close, was doing terrible things to his concentration. It took him a moment to understand what the other man had said. “Unlikely. Romans burn. We don’t darken.”

“A fair-skinned bunch, to be certain,” Hannibal murmured. He wiped the cloth over Will’s chest and followed the path with his mouth, his lips, his tongue.

Will’s breath left him in a rush and he closed his eyes. “Trying to taste the pale?”

Hannibal made a sound of assent against his collarbone, nipping at it. The hand under Will’s shorts had travelled up to his hip. The cloth was rubbing damp and cool along his sides.

Will made an almost pained noise and his legs twitched. His shorts were tight and sticky against him. “You keep such a pace and you’ll not even be able to finish washing me.”

Hannibal smiled against his skin. “If you were trying not to encourage me, you have failed.” Still, he pulled back and resumed the lavation. Under Will’s arms, down his back, his knees, his calves, his hands. He was remarkably paced and thorough.

And Will was losing his mind.

“Please, Hannibal.”

Hannibal made an inquisitive noise and continued about his task. He was rubbing slow circles with the cloth into Will’s chest. “I believe you told me to alter my pace.”

The cloth rubbed firmly over a nipple and Will hissed. “And I believe that location has been thoroughly cleansed.”

Hannibal’s eyebrows rose as though the proclamation surprised him. “Has it? Let me see.” Leaning forward, he latched his mouth onto the nipple he had been tormenting moments before and sucked hard.

The curse that left Will’s mouth was one he couldn’t even remember learning. One of his hands leapt to Hannibal’s hair, curling into the dark strands and holding him there. “Hannibal, *please*.”

“Please what, Will?” Hannibal whispered the words straight into Will’s flesh, conversing with his body as an old friend. His hands were free of the cloth now and massaging firmly against the younger man’s hips, thumbs sweeping the edge of his groin with every movement. “What would please you?”

“You—oh!” Will fell back on his elbows when Hannibal’s tongue trailed down his stomach. He lifted his hips and Hannibal followed him easily, tugging the shorts off and casting them aside.

“This?” Hannibal pressed, gently sinking his teeth into Will’s bared hip bone. His arms stretched up, sliding his palms along an arched torso before pushing his companion fully onto his back. Hooking Will’s knees over his shoulders, he placed an open-mouthed kiss at the base of his cock. No pomp and ceremony—just his mouth *there*, hot and wet. “Does this please you?”

Will’s mouth was open and gasping. Each word spoken vibrated against him. He dug his heels into Hannibal’s back without thought and pushed against his mouth. “Yes. Yes, stop *asking* me.”

Hannibal laughed breathlessly and for a moment Will feared the teasing would continue, but then he was enveloped completely and it was everything he could do not to shout. Unlike the torment of his cleaning, Hannibal was not gentle or slow. He moved with a purpose, bobbing his head and twisting his tongue until Will was a shuddering mess, holding on and gasping for air.

Will rolled his hips with each bow of Hannibal’s head, moving mindlessly even as Hannibal held him to the bed. Exhaustion and pleasure were making his limbs numb and tingling jolts were making his breaths stutter and hitch. He slid his hands back into the other man’s hair, tugging as mildly as he could remember to manage. “H-Hannibal. Touch yourself, please.”

He was too far gone to feel embarrassed by the request. His mind was a buzz of sensation and coherence had left alongside his reservations. All he knew was that he would be useless when this was over and he wanted Hannibal to reach that peak with him. Wanted to hear the sounds of his pleasure muffled around his cock. Wanted that knowledge.

His own thoughts made him moan and his hips jerked. “Hannibal, please. Let me hear you.” There was a shift in the shoulder under his left leg and he could feel it. He could feel Hannibal moving to fulfill his request and join him in this high. It made him feel powerful in a way he couldn’t describe. That he could demand pleasure of a man of such strength. That he could command him to strive for release. It was a thrill Will had never before experienced.

But when Hannibal moaned—*oh*, when he moaned—Will was lost. The sound was pure feeling, radiating from his cock into his belly and turning the room dizzy. He was pulling at Hannibal’s hair now, likely too hard, but the older man made no sound of complaint, instead sucking harder and moving faster. Will tried desperately to keep his voice low and bite back the sounds. They were in a barracks, after all. The commander’s quarters may have been separated from the rest, but they were by no means in another world.

But then Hannibal’s tongue circled just under the head of his cock and Will’s thoughts of propriety fled to the distant past and he was groaning and coming so suddenly it startled him. He squeezed his eyes shut and rode out the pleasure, barely conscious of Hannibal’s low growl when he achieved his own release and continued to sooth Will’s own.

As the world began to refocus, Will realized that his hips were still thrust in the air and he let them fall, spent. The cool air of the room hit the sheen of sweat on his skin and he laughed quietly at the futility of being cleaned just moments earlier. Hannibal laid his head on Will’s hip and they stayed that way for the longest time, each trying to catch their breath and saying nothing in the heady silence of the room.

There was an intimacy in that moment, deep and almost overwhelming. Hannibal was still knelt on the floor, flushed face pressed into the overheated skin of Will's hip. Will's hand was settled softly at the back of Hannibal's neck, holding him there with a featherlight touch. Right then Will didn't feel like himself, but an extension of the man beside him. He'd heard sex described as an experience where one was unaware where they began and their partner ended, but such a sensation was implied during the act itself.

Here in the aftermath was where Will felt it most poignantly. After the pleasure and the heat had passed and faded and all that was left was the sticky skin and soft breathing. He could feel every strand of Hannibal's hair where it splayed out across his side, the soft exhales of Hannibal's breath sending a shiver up his spine every time the air hit Will's oversensitive flesh, and the steady beat of Hannibal's heart where his chest was pressed against his calf.

Will had lain with men in the past, but never before had he experienced this closeness he felt with Hannibal.

Night had fallen and the room was illuminated by the flicker of the oil lamp. A yellow glow coated the room in honey and Will found his eyes slipping closed. He was half asleep by the time Hannibal moved, using the cloth to clean himself before returning the basin to its home and easing Will fully onto the bed. Will followed his movements sluggishly, obediently sliding under the blanket Hannibal held up for him and yawning as the Persian dimmed the lamp before snuffing it out completely.

Will rolled onto his side and allowed Hannibal to slide up behind him, wrapping an arm around his torso and holding him close. They were stripped of their garments and the skin pressed together from their shoulders all the way down to where their legs tangled together. Will never wanted to leave that moment.

Hannibal breathed out a laugh into the back of Will's neck. "You have no need to until morning."

Blinking in confusion, Will glanced back over his shoulder. "Did I say that aloud?"

"You did."

"Oh." Will settled and closed his eyes. "Let morning come in a year, then. I'm not ready for it."

Hannibal kissed Will's shoulder and breathed deeply of him. "Perhaps, when this war is over, we can have that year."

Will wanted to reply. He wanted to ask what Hannibal meant by that—what he was offering—but he was fast asleep before the question could leave his lips and the night faded away into dreams.

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Will was in the desert. He knew that much, despite never having encountered a desert before.

It was just like the stories he had heard as a boy. Sweeping hills of sand, golden and flowing as far as the eye could see. The heat from the sun bore down on him with a ferocity like he had never experienced. It made his skin feel tight like it was choking the life from him. He felt a thirst so potent it was as if he'd been denied water for years. He licked his lips to try and fend off the strain of it, but his mouth was dry.

Panting in the heat, he looked around for some sign of where he was. There was no one, nothing, no sign of life other than himself. He was a speck in a sea of sand.

And so he began to walk. Slowly, he trudged his way through the never-ending monotony of terrain, eyes seeking any sign of difference or change. The heat bordered on incapacitating. It weighed him down and made his breath catch in his lungs thickly.

How had he gotten here? Had he been separated from the legion? Where was Hannibal?

His mind was fogged over from the sun. His memory was fragmented and scattered.

Will didn't know how he had ended up in this place. He was alone and without resource. He had to escape, but how? How could one escape a place so desolate? There were no options here. He had no recourse other than to keep walking and praying to whatever gods he'd heard of in hopes that one, just one, might hear him.

There had to be a way out of this place; this hopelessness.

A wave of dizziness overtook him and he groaned, falling to his knees and wincing as the scorching sands bit into his skin. A gust of wind blew fiercely past him and carried with it a whisper.

Will.

Blinking blearily, he searched for the source, but there was only sand and heat and bleakness. He would have no help here.

But then it came again. Another breath of wind in his face, smoky and hot.

Will!

Will coughed and it tasted of ash. Confused, he coughed again and the taste was strange and burned in his mouth. What—

"Will! Wake up!"

Hacking, Will shot up in the bed and looked around in a panic. The room was swathed in orange and the heat was unbearable. Hannibal was pulling on his clothes and tossing Will's onto the bed, running to grab his sword and satchel.

"Hannibal?" Will stumbled out of bed and began mindlessly pulling on his clothing. He was still half-asleep, uncomprehending. Another wave of heat hit his side and he wondered if he was still dreaming. "What's happening?"

Hannibal grabbed his arm as soon as it was through the sleeve of his tunic, pulling him forcefully to the door. “A fire, Will.” He shouldered the door open with a bang and dragged Will out into the hall.

It was then that Will woke up completely.

Vicious, hungry flames were licking at the west walls and the air was dense with smoke. Screams and shouts of the men in the building were echoing from every direction, nearly drowned out by the crackle of the fire burning through wood and clay.

“Why are the barracks on fire?” Will cried out as Hannibal continued to urge him towards the stairs. Men were rushing downwards in various states of dress.

“I don’t know!” Hannibal shouted over the noise. “We must get out! Stay with me, Will!” He let go to urge a man consumed by coughing back to his feet and direct him towards the stairs.

Confused and afraid, Will latched onto the back of Hannibal’s tunic to keep track of him and together they made their way down the stairs, occasionally stopping to help others overcome by the smoke. Bahadur met them on the ground floor and quickly ran to them.

“Hannibal! Will!”

“Are all the men out?” Hannibal asked hoarsely.

“This is the last of them.” Bahadur’s eyes were red and he held a cloth over his mouth. Will mimicked him by pulling his tunic up over his face to try and block out some of the smoke.

Hannibal moved to reply, but the building groaned and the roof to their right began to crumble. “Out!” he yelled. “Out now!” He shoved the other two men ahead of himself and Will blindly sprinted for the door and into the street.

Whirling around, Will searched through the chaos in dread. “Hannibal?” His vision was watery and blurring. Black smoke was pouring from the barracks and billowing into the sky. The flames were reaching higher and men had begun to race to the canal with buckets in an attempt to quell the flames. Bahadur was holding him by the shoulders, likely to prevent him from running back inside. A loud crack and a beam fell. “Hannibal!”

Moments later, Hannibal was stumbling out into the clear air, helping a limping man. Will nearly sobbed in relief and sagged in Bahadur’s grip, leaning against him. Bahadur, ever the best of men, held him upright without complaint.

The town had joined the spectacle, watching from a distance as the fire lit up the city in an angry hue of orange and red. The city guard hung back, warding away townspeople and ensuring the fire did not spread to neighboring buildings. Fortuitously, the building was close to the canal and far enough separated from the rest of the city that the flames were unlikely to spread.

Men from the legion were beginning to join them, running in to help carry water and throw it on the flames.

Will turned to Hannibal and saw that his face was streaked with soot. “Should we help them?”

Hannibal said nothing, staring blankly on as the building burned.

Bahadur answered for him. “There is little purpose.” His voice was rough and coarse from coughing. “We must let it burn itself out.”

Sure enough, the men who had been attempting to fight the flames began to give up one by one, realizing that they would find no victory here. In the end, all they could do was watch as the fire swallowed the building whole.

It took an hour before the fire began to sputter and lessen. The townspeople had returned to their homes at the urging of the city guard and the men of the auxilia and legion had sat helplessly in the dirt, waiting until the flames had become small enough for them to combat them with purpose. Hannibal had left to speak to his men, seeing to their needs and asking them questions. Will and Bahadur had not spoken during this time, watching silently as the flames burned a thousand questions into their minds.

It wasn’t until the men had resumed fetching water for the flames that Will finally voiced one of the questions as he heaved his own bucket from the canal.

“How did this happen?”

Hannibal grunted as he filled a bucket. “Two of the sentries I posted saw men lighting fire to the rear entrance. They did not chase them in favor of warning those of us inside.”

Will’s shoulder strained under the weight of the bucket as he carried it back. “You had sentries?”

“We are in a city that clearly does not desire our presence. Of course I do.”

Will’s eyes fell on the smoldering ruins of what was once the auxilia appointments. “Do you think it was someone from the city?”

Hannibal was silent at length, throwing his water onto the petering flames and taking a deep breath. “I do not know.”

Will threw his own water and frowned, turning to face his companion. “But you suspect—”

“I do not know, Will,” Hannibal interrupted. His face looked drawn and tired. He sighed and shut his eyes. “Speculation at this moment will only cause more problems. I must find a place for my men to stay. Ensure their safety. Then, I will try to discover what has happened.”

Will felt immeasurably naïve. So much must have been weighing on Hannibal’s mind in that moment and Will felt thoughtless for forgetting how much responsibility fell on his shoulders. “You should find Caeso and discuss new appointments with him. I will stay here and help tend to the fire.”

“If there are other appointments to be had,” Hannibal muttered. With a weary smile, he set his bucket on the ground and placed a hand on Will’s shoulder. “It seems we were not allowed to await the morning, Will. I am sorry.”

Will’s heart clenched and he shook his head. “Go find Caeso.”

With one last squeeze to Will’s shoulder, Hannibal nodded and left.

Bahadur came to a stop next to Will, empty bucket hanging from his hand. “You know what this means.”

Will stared at the rubble. “I have concerns.”

“I feel foolish for not anticipating this.”

“You mustn’t—” Will bit his lip and turned to his friend. “Bahadur, there was no way to know they would go to this length.”

“Fear drives men to do terrible, reckless things.” Bahadur frowned and looked towards the city. “Reconciliation seems impossible here.”

“It will change when the emperor is here,” Will said, his words sounding weak to his own ears. “Focuses will alter.”

Bahadur smiled feebly—gratefully. “I hope you are right, Will.” He turned and went back towards the canal for more water.

Will stood rooted to the spot, watching as the exhausted men of the auxilia and legion continued to drench the embers. Some had begun to search for supplies worth saving, but there was little hope of finding anything useful. The barracks were decimated. There was nothing left to salvage. The only question remaining was if the safety of these men could be salvaged in a city that was determined to drive them out.

“I hope I’m right too,” Will murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Now, I know I have some readers who enjoy fact tidbits about the story, so I figured I'd clarify some things about our newly introduced Tadesse. He is from the kingdom of Aksum, which was in northern Ethiopia from about 100 to 900 CE. The Erythraean sea that Will mentions is another, much older name for the Red Sea. The Aksumites were heavily involved in the trade with Rome and India.

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter. This is where things start to get... eventful.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

> *“I cannot abide by a world where loving someone can be the death of a man.”*

Chapter Notes

> Sweet baby jeebus, is this a hallucination? No, you're not going crazy, don't worry. This is an actual, honest to god, almost 3 year late update to the story. I never abandoned it and I'm sorry for taking so long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This can only end terribly,” Bahadur stated simply, a deep and worried frown pulling at his mouth.

Will squinted into the afternoon light and sighed. “I’ve never known you to be a pessimist, Bahadur.”

“And I’ve never known you to be blind.”

Will raised his brows at the statement, letting out an aborted chuckle of surprise. “Fair.”

Bahadur smiled weakly and shrugged. “Apologies, Will. You know I don’t—”

“No, please.” Will raised his hands to ward away the contrition. “I understand, I do. There is no wise perspective that grants this situation optimism.”

Bahadur hummed and nodded. He turned to look back at the building before them with a grimace. Will followed his gaze and tried not to let his chest constrict with anxious worry.

Caeso had been successful in his search for new appointments to grant the auxilia after the fire. After two days of the men sleeping in tents on the farmland, Caeso had persistently whittled Laurentinus into agreement. The arson was clearly the act of the city and as such, the city owed the auxilia new lodgings as recompense.

Bahadur was worried the city would not see it in such a light. Will was inclined to agree with him.

The new barracks were much further into the city than their predecessor—further from the canals and closer to the legion’s own appointments. While some argued pushing foreigners

further into the city would only incite further action against them, other more powerful voices declared the proximity to the legion would dissuade anyone from a second attempt on the mercenaries.

Well, that and the armed city guard now grudgingly stationed at the building at all times.

Will let his eyes wander over the guards on duty that afternoon, standing stiffly vigil as the men of the auxilia loaded what few belongings that hadn't burned inside. He had asked Caeso why men of the legion were unable to take guard.

"It is on Laurentinus' order, Will," he had replied cryptically. "His reasons are his own."

Will snorted at the memory. Laurentinus and his reasons. Will had a lot to say about that man's *reasons*.

The guards looked outrageously out of place and entirely aware of the irony of it. Their faces were drawn and dark, glowering at the dirt for all the use it would do. Some even went so far as to turn their glares on the men of the auxilia, but as of yet none had made moves to do anything other than scowl impotently.

Will frowned. "They won't do anything." He said it to reassure himself just as much as the man beside him.

Bahadur didn't reply for a moment, his own gaze lingering on the guards. "It would be foolish of them. I see Laurentinus' perspective in placing us in their care."

"I'm afraid I cannot say the same. They clearly did nothing to hinder previous aggression. They encouraged it."

"True as that is, giving them charge in this puts them in a position of culpability," Bahadur explained. "Now, if there were to be another attack, it would either be because the guards did nothing to prevent it—"

"Or because they did it themselves," Will finished, finally beginning to understand.

Bahadur nodded and crossed his arms over his chest. "Precisely. Either way, anything that would happen to our barracks now would fall on their heads. It is unlikely, no matter their hatred, that they will allow that to happen when the arrival of the emperor is so near."

Will gnawed at the inside of his cheek and ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it into further disarray. "It is an unsteady gambit, at best."

"And yet the only sensible one to make, short of us leaving the city and significantly depleting the numbers of the century." Bahadur waved at hand aimlessly. "No use in dwelling, Will. Let us speak of other things."

Will snorted. "Very well. The sun burns hot today."

Bahadur rolled his eyes, all good humor and friendly exasperation. "Were you not supposed to continue your training with Tadesse? Today is as good a day as any to resume."

“I—” Will frowned. “I had assumed—”

“What?” Bahadur intercepted his line of thought smoothly. “That recent events would halt any and all activity for the foreseeable future? A fire has doomed us to perpetually ringing our hands and staring off towards the horizon?”

With a glare, Will pinched his lips at the other man. “I can’t determine who is more well-versed in sarcasm, you or Hannibal.”

“We are evenly matched, I should think.” There was a long pause, full of thought. “Truly, though, Will, we cannot allow the circumstances to deter us. We must continue on with our lives in spite of it.”

“Not allow them the victory,” Will agreed, subdued.

“Not every battle is with the sword.”

“Unfortunately.”

Bahadur regarded Will in silence for a moment that stretched into the heat of the afternoon air. After a time, he seemed to come to a decision. “Have you eaten?”

Taken aback by the question, Will blinked dumbly. “I don’t believe so. Firuz requested my assistance with transferring your stockpiles. I’ve been with him and his brother for most of the morning.”

Bahadur’s countenance became unimpressed. “It is no longer morning, Will.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Go. Eat something. Take a break,” Bahadur ordered gently. “I shall find Tadesse and see if he is willing to resume your training.” He grunted. “And inform Firuz and Jalil that they should feed you if they’re going to work you like a mule,” he added as an afterthought.

Will’s mouth pursed and he crossed his arms over his chest, trying and likely failing to appear haughty. “You’ve taken a liking to interrupting me, you know.”

Bahadur laughed, a welcome sound in the stress of the past few days. “Only when it is necessary.”

Will chuckled. “I suppose I can’t find a reason to argue with that.”

“You two are having far more fun in this endeavor than I expected.”

They both turned on their heels to see Tertius standing a few paces away, head tilted and a hesitant smile pulling at his lips.

“Tertius!” Will’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “What brings you here?”

Seeing the greeting as a welcome, the legionnaire took a few steps forward. “Seeking you, actually. Besides, the auxilia is mere paces from our own barracks now.” He nodded genially in Bahadur’s direction, a far more familiar gesture than Will was expecting. “Bahadur.”

The nod was returned. “Tertius.”

“You’ve met?” Will wasn’t entirely sure why it surprised him, but it certainly did.

Tertius turned his amused gaze back towards Will. “We’ve fought together, Will. Of course we’ve met.”

Overwhelmed quite suddenly with a guilty embarrassment, Will ducked his head and grumbled his response under his breath. “You’d yet to meet Hannibal.”

“One does not often converse with officers outside of being tasked by them,” Tertius retorted evenly. “Caeso and Valerian being our particular exceptions, of course.”

Will hummed in agreement. “Speaking of Valerian, I’ve seen too little of him in days past.” He faltered on the wording of his next question. “Is he doing—is he well?”

“With Jove gone to escort the emperor, you mean?” Tertius quirked a brow.

A shrug. “Well, yes.”

“As well as you’d be if Hannibal left for such a stretch, I’d imagine.”

Will almost balked at the blunt acknowledgment of the nature of his and Hannibal’s relationship before remembering that Tertius had long since voiced his support on the matter, in his own way. Instead, his affront dissolved into discomfort. “You’re right. A foolish question.”

“That’s not what I—” Tertius winced and pressed his thumb to his forehead. “Forgive me, Will. That was not what I was trying to imply. I simply do not know how to answer you. You would know better than I how he might feel. I’ve seen as little of him as you have since Jove’s departure.”

“Perhaps now would be a good time to seek him out,” Bahadur suggested, startling the two Romans with the reminder of his presence. “You need to eat and I need to find Tadesse. Go find your friend and eat. We can meet when the sun has become less sweltering.”

Will nodded and clapped Bahadur briefly on the shoulder. “Very well. I’ll return.”

Bahadur smiled. “I should hope so.” With a nod to both of them, he turned and made his way into the barracks.

“A good man,” Tertius commented blithely when the man in question had disappeared into the building.

As true as the non sequitur was, Will still found himself perplexed. “What makes you say that?”

Tertius shrugged. “He fights well and he speaks well and you seem to enjoy his company.”

Will laughed and followed as the other man began walking down the road towards the marketplace. “You say that as though those are the only facts that allow you a determination of ‘goodness’.”

Tertius smirked, tapping his fingers against his thigh as they walked. “That and how well he can hold his wine, I suppose, but I’ve not had the privilege of seeing him drink.”

“I’ve not seen him drink much, myself,” Will admitted. “Always has his wits about him, that man.”

“Unsurprising.”

They fell into a companionable silence after that, Will content to let his friend lead him to wherever they were going. With no immediate responsibilities due to him and the majority of the stockpiles having already been transferred into the new auxilia appointments, he found himself breathing lighter than he had in days.

He glanced sideways at his companion and smiled to himself, knowing a great deal of his calm was due to be credited to Tertius himself. Tertius had always had a way about him—diffusing tension as easily as he held his shield. He had ever been a comforting presence, something that Will would eternally appreciate about him.

In a fortuitous turn of events, they came across both Valerian and Cimon towards the east end of the marketplace. The group found their way to the inn and had cheap wine and crusts of bread in front of them in short order, both ingredients to good conversation.

“How are the guards faring at the new holdings for the auxilia?” Valerian asked, his voice so quiet it was nearly swallowed by the chatter of other diners.

Will took a sip of his wine and wondered over how to respond. “Are you asking after their struggle to maintain peace or their struggle not to break that peace themselves?”

Cimon coughed loudly and Will raised his eyebrows in response.

“The temper of your tongue grows wilder by the week, dear Will,” Cimon observed. Will couldn’t determine if he looked more impressed or disappointed.

Valerian spoke up before Will could get in a retort. “You know as well as I that I am asking after the latter, though I’d have endeavored to find better wording.”

Will sighed. “I’ve found myself tired of stepping delicately as of late.” He shook his head and continued quickly, cutting off any chance that his fellows would take to question his words. “They look as though all their wine has soured and they have been forced to drink it anyway, by the constant looks on their faces. They are clearly displeased, though I’ve been swayed to see a perspective that gives me confidence that they will not act on this displeasure for sake of their own hides.”

Valerian nodded, expression muted and distant in a way that made Will feel as though he was only partially present in their conversation. “Whomever swayed you was likely correct. They have been granted an obvious responsibility and I would be terribly surprised if they chose now, of all times, to throw up their arms against their governor.”

“I wonder if they would see their rebellion as a direct affront to Laurentinus,” Tertius murmured contemplatively. “It seems they have a certain disconnect regarding loyalties and duties.”

“Surely they couldn’t be so foolish as to think they would be pardoned?” Will asked, making a face of disgust.

“Frightened men are not rational men.” Tertius shrugged.

“Regardless,” Valerian interjected, waving a dismissive hand and shaking his head. “It is anyone’s guess how this will develop from here. The emperor will be here in short order and focuses will finally shift back towards the war rather than petty squabbles.”

Will picked at his bread and sighed heavily. “So our situation necessitates outlasting ignorance.”

Valerian’s lips thinned but he nodded slightly in agreement. “I suppose so.” His face seemed drawn, like he hadn’t slept in days. Suddenly Will was overcome with guilt for not considering the state of his friend.

“If the emperor is to be here soon then that means Jove’s return is imminent as well.” Will’s statement resulted in Valerian wincing almost imperceptibly. Causing his friend distress had not been his goal. “Forgive me. I thought—” He cut himself off and frowned down at the table.

“No, Will, please. It’s fine,” Valerian reassured him. “I’ve found myself handling Jove’s absence far more poorly than I had expected, but you are right. We will see him again soon, I hope.” He smiled weakly.

Cimon grinned and reached across the table to place a hulking hand on Valerian’s shoulder, practically swallowing it whole under one meaty palm. “I have never known the two of you to be apart. The universe will surely correct this error with haste.”

Valerian chuckled. “Thank you, Cimon.”

Will chewed on his lip and sat back, falling silent to watch as the conversation shifted to better and brighter topics. He felt as though a dark cloud was hovering just out of his vision, following him like a curse wherever he went. As he watched his fellow legionnaires laugh and drink and catch up on the less foreboding events around them, he wondered if he was losing his place among them. It had been so short a time since they had arrived in Antioch, but Will felt the weight of a thousand worlds upon his shoulders and it made him feel disjointed—separated from his peers—like they were now parts of separate stories.

Tertius seemed to notice his discontent and reached across the table to lay a warm, calming hand on Will's forearm. "Stop brooding," he whispered. "You're with family."

Relaxing, Will obeyed.

Tertius was right. Whatever ways their paths had diverged in recent events, they were still family. That would never change. Will wouldn't allow it to.

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After the group had parted ways sometime later, Will made his way back to the auxilia to see if Bahadur had managed to wrangle up Tadesse for another round of training.

There was a part of him, rooted deep in his perpetual paranoia, that felt as though requesting Tadesse to pick up a blade and train him again so quickly after the fire was inappropriate. Despite this gnawing doubt, Will knew Bahadur was right. Life had to go on. It didn't cease simply because something terrible happened.

As he was making his way through one of the narrow side alleys that led to the barracks, Will heard a commotion around the corner. Angry, unfamiliar words reached his ears just as quickly. Persian, without question.

Confused, he rounded the corner to see Firuz and Jalil both stuck in aggressive posture, snarling in each other's faces.

Firuz hissed something Will couldn't understand and gesticulated sharply. He was clearly displeased and making it well known to his brother.

Jalil shoved at Firuz's shoulder altogether too harshly and responded with equal ire, gesturing with his other hand out towards the rest of the city. He crossed his arms and turned in head to ignore whatever the response was that he received.

Will wasn't sure what he should do. This seemed a private argument, but any of the auxilia showing this type of temper in the middle of the city was a dangerous thing. Should one of the townsfolk overcome with mistrust happen by…

Jalil moved to avoid Firuz reaching a hand to him and saw Will at the end of the alley in doing so. A myriad of expressions crossed over his face—surprise, anger, resignation, bitterness—and all the while Will stood there like a startled fawn, ashamed of having been caught intruding on the moment. Seemingly spurred into action by Will's obvious indecision, Jalil spat something that sounded particularly scathing at no one in particular and stormed off, shrugging off Firuz as he called after him.

Will frowned and stood uselessly and Firuz sighed with a breath heavy of sorrows and turned to him.

"I am sorry you saw that."

With a grimace, will leaned against the wall to his left and looked at the other man with concern. "I am sorry I intruded. It was accidental." Firuz waved away the apology with a

tired hand. “But now that I’m here, I may as well ask. What happened? Can I help?” Will didn’t know why he felt compelled to offer assistance to what was clearly a spat between two siblings. Perhaps it was due to how kind and gentle Firuz had always been towards him—always grateful for Will’s assistance and never overstaying his welcome. Will felt a small amount of protectiveness, he supposed.

It seemed Firuz was too worn down by the argument to even be surprised at the offer. Instead of recoiling, he crossed his arms over his stomach and leaned back against the wall opposite Will. “He wants to leave.”

“What?”

Firuz shrugged, frowned, and then shrugged again. “I do not know. He wishes to leave here. Antioch. The military. He wishes me to come with him. He says that the city will throw us out, even if it is just to throw out our bodies.”

Will blinked slowly as he processed this information. The dark insight of Jalil’s assumptions was hard to dodge. “I suppose I can understand. It has not been an easy time for the auxilia since we’ve been here.”

Firuz closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “No, it hasn’t, but that does not mean we should leave. We have a duty.”

“I see. So he wants to leave and you want to stay. That was the argument.”

“Yes.”

Will worried his lower lip for a moment, considering his next words carefully. “Why do you wish to stay? I understand duty, of course, but you are free men in ways that the soldiers of the legion are not. Are you not a member of the auxilia of your own choice?” The strange look he received in response made him wonder if he had chosen his words more poorly than he had thought.

“I…” Firuz trailed off, considering. “I think Romans see duty as different. Duty to you is…” He trailed off again, struggling to find a word. “It is obligation, yes?”

Giving the question the thought it deserved, Will looked down the alleyway. They were still alone. “I suppose that’s a fair interpretation. Duty is what is required of us. Expected.”

With a contemplative sound, Firuz nodded. There was silence for many seconds after that, both men trying to decide how to explain themselves. Firuz broke the silence first.

“For me, duty is a choice. A purpose. I choose to be in the auxilia and have duty because it gives my days…” He made a sound of indecision and stopped.

“Meaning?” Will offered.

“Yes. That is the way I see it.”

Will nodded. “I understand.”

They fell into an uncomfortable silence once again. Neither of them was sure of how to continue. Will coughed and shifted his weight. It was best to be direct, he decided.

“I think you should do what is best for you. You can always find new purpose and meaning in your life. Whether that is here with the auxilia or somewhere else with your brother, that is for you to decide,” Will said this with more confidence than he felt, more than a little startled at himself, a soldier of the Roman legion, suggesting that a soldier could simply choose to walk away from war if it suited them. But Firuz could, couldn’t he? Will somehow had little doubt that Hannibal would allow the brothers to leave if they approached him seriously about it.

Unnoticing of Will’s internal reservations, Firuz seemed to take his words with undue gravity. He nodded, more to himself than anything, and gave Will a small smile. “I appreciate your advice. I will think on it. I only hope Jalil will give me time to think.” He murmured the last sentence with the tone of someone who did not wish to pass their worry onto others. It was reinforced by another weak smile moments later. “But do not worry. He puffs his chest, but all will be well.”

Will wasn’t sure if he was the one who needed convincing in that moment. “Perhaps if you spoke to Bahadur or Hannibal, one of them could speak with him.”

Firuz looked like he wanted to disagree but stopped himself short. “Perhaps.” It was clear, despite his response, that he had no belief that would be of benefit. “I thank you again, Will. I will return to the barracks now.”

Will pushed away from the wall. “I’m going that way myself. Might I walk with you?”

Firuz gave his assent easily and the two walked side by side to the auxilia’s new appointments. There was a discomfort in the air between them, but it was not overly stifling. It was a discomfort born of Will’s feelings of uselessness and Firuz’s own concerns. They parted ways with only soft smiles and nods.

Taking a deep breath, Will returned his focus to finding Bahadur or Tadesse and resuming his training. The past few minutes had made him feel tightly wound and tense. It would do him well to release some of that energy back into the world before the strings wrapped around his mind snapped like a broken instrument.

He found Tadesse quite easily. Most of the men of the auxilia were crowded together in the same area as they unpacked their meager stores and talked to one another. They put on appearances that they were hard at work preparing their new accommodations, but the closeness of the group was likely less out of practicality and more a paranoia to be back in the city that had tried to set fire to them not days before.

Tadesse was sitting on a crate not far away, talking to a man Will was unfamiliar with. “Will! Bahadur tells me you come. Sit!” He slapped a hand down on the crate next to him with a grin.

Will obeyed and sat, looking up at the man Tadesse was speaking to. He had narrow eyes and a pointed nose. He looked both very young and very old at the same time, as though his body

couldn't quite decide what it wanted to do with itself. "Hello."

The man looked bored and nodded. "Medic."

It was a simple acknowledgement and oddly blunt, but Will couldn't find it within himself to be offended. Instead, he turned his attention to the man beside him. "Bahadur told you I was coming?"

Tadesse grinned once more and Will wondered if that was his resting expression. "Of course! We were to train, but then the fire." He shook his head and looked more disappointed at the delay in their training than the mention of the fire itself. "We must train."

"I would understand if you wished to wait," Will suggested. "These days have been difficult ones."

Tadesse scoffed and stood, slapping his thighs as he did so. "No. Hannibal tells me to train you. I train you. Come."

Will huffed out a soft laugh and stood, knowing better than to debate this. If Tadesse was ready, so was he. That being said, there was still a distinct issue with their plans in these new appointments. While the previous building had possessed the grounds behind it to allow acceptable room for training, this new building most certainly did not. It was far further into the city than the last and as such it was surrounded quite soundly on all sides by others structures.

Hesitating, Will looked over at Tadesse. "Where shall we go? There's no room here and we can't very well train in the walking path."

Tadesse laughed raucously and began walking out of the building. He waited until he was sure Will was following him closely and they were well down the street before he explained himself. "You are right. New barracks bad for training. We go outside the gates now. Hannibal says it is better. Less noise from us inside the walls makes the city less angry. That is what he thinks."

"And what do you think?" Will asked cautiously.

There was that perpetual grin again as Tadesse glanced over at him. "I think I have a place to train and that makes me happy."

Will nodded, recognizing the response as Tadesse's way of saying he didn't wish to discuss the implications of the issues at hand. Oddly enough, Will found himself inordinately grateful that Tadesse had such a single-minded focus. It seemed everywhere he turned, the signs of unrest and discord were spilling over the seams of the city. It was a compelling sort of rest to be with someone who cared so little for it that he lacked the desire to even discuss it. It was a reprieve, of sorts.

So, with that in mind, Will decided to respect that unspoken agreement to focus on training and nothing else. Clearing his mind had never been an easy thing, but getting persistent bruising as you were slapped around with a training sword was remarkably meditative.

It was hours before they both decided to call it quits for the day. The sun was wavering in the distance, threatening nightfall in the coming hours.

With a heavy sigh and a wipe of his sweaty brow, Will thanked Tadesse for his time. Tadesse, in turn, smothered him with compliments on his progress until Will fled the scene to retain some dignity in his embarrassment, Tadesse's laughter following his graceless escape.

It was surprisingly easy to find Hannibal once Will put an effort towards seeking him out.

Standing in the doorway awkwardly, Will simply said "Oh", and stared at the other man in the room.

Hannibal quirked a brow at him, bemused. "Oh?"

"Sorry, I—" Will coughed and had the mind to laugh at himself and walk further into the room. "Somehow I hadn't expected you to be here."

"Well, it is my room."

Will snorted. "I know. I wasn't walking into all the rooms hoping to find you. I did check."

"Well then." Hannibal stood and walked over, grabbing Will by the hips and pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. "I suspect my presence shouldn't be so surprising then."

Will blinked, marveling at how he was always still a little stunned when Hannibal kissed him —even if only for a moment. "No, I only meant—" He shook his head and let his forehead fall onto Hannibal's shoulder in defeat. "Forgive me. Words seem to be escaping me for no good reason."

"You needn't have a good reason, Will," Hannibal soothed. "Come. Sit. It looks as though you have been training, yes? I'll fetch a cloth."

Will did as he was told, the aches in his muscles only now starting to make themselves known now that the heat and adrenaline of movement was faded away. The sweat on the back of his neck felt cold and sticky. The festering thoughts that had been troubling him earlier in the day were crawling back up his spine, slowly and surely.

He smiled in gratitude when Hannibal presented a cool cloth and took it, wiping a day's worth of grime and sweat and stress from his brow. Hannibal took a seat next to Will on the bed and gently set down a bowl of water so Will could clean himself with relative ease.

"Do you feel you are learning much from Tadesse?"

Will grunted thoughtfully as he dipped the cloth in the bowl and wiped at his arms. "I do. He is a very jovial man, but a knowledgeable one."

"He spreads the kind of joy that only a man who has seen true suffering can do," was Hannibal's contemplative reply.

Will nodded. “He’s told me some of his story. So many different journeys here among the men.” He glanced over at Hannibal and worried his lower lip. “How have so many with such different lives and dreams come to be in such a singular situation?”

Hannibal appeared to give the question some thought, plucking idly at the bandages sticking out of his shirtsleeve.

Distracted, Will set his cloth in the bowl and reached a hand to Hannibal’s shoulder. “This should be a long way into healing by now, shouldn’t it?”

Hannibal made a sound as though he had forgotten about the wound entirely. “Ah, not a long way, I shouldn’t think, but it has not had troubles.”

Without asking, Will shifted the shoulder of Hannibal’s tunic aside and gently peeled back the bandage to look inside. The wound was angry, crusty, and red, but it was healing. Satisfied, Will sat back, blushing when he was met with raised eyebrows. “Sorry.”

A chuckle. “Don’t apologize to me, Will. I am pleased that you feel this comfortable with me.”

Will shrugged. “How could I not at this juncture?”

Hannibal simply nodded and went silent as Will continued with his simple bathing. After a stretch, he hummed and turned back to the younger man. “Your question from earlier.” He waited until Will looked up at him in attention before continuing. “It is the nature of the world, is it not? With such vast differences to cover, so many people scattering the landscape, it seems impossible that we would not all have such starkly contradicting stories. I believe it is those differences in experience that make winning a war possible. It take more than one individual’s perspective to find victory in battle.”

“Would that certain officers agreed with you,” Will muttered thoughtlessly. He froze for the briefest of moments before allowing himself to relax. If he couldn’t speak freely to Hannibal, then who could he?

For his part, Hannibal simply laughed. “Too true.” He reached out and ran a hand though Will’s messy hair. “I must discuss some things with Bahadur before I turn in for the night.”

Will stood and took the bowl and cloth to a table, setting them aside. Leaning his hip against the table, he considered Hannibal for a moment. “I’d like to stay here tonight.”

Hannibal gave him a wry smile. “Oh?”

Will flushed and looked away. “Not for that. Well—” he coughed. “Perhaps not solely.” He should his head and kept his eyes averted from the smile he knew Hannibal must have been sporting. “This is the first night you and your men are back in the city walls, with city guard at your doors no less.” Finally, he looked back. Hannibal’s face had dropped its humor. Will tried not to feel guilty about causing the change in disposition. “I think it wise for a Roman to be here tonight. After all, Laurentinus wanted me maintaining the relationship with the auxilia, did he not? I cannot very well do that if I’m not here in moments like this.”

Hannibal looked more conflicted than Will had ever seen him. A myriad of concerns and reservations passed over his sharp features and Will was almost tempted to ask after his thoughts, but Hannibal spoke before he had the chance.

“Very well. If that is what you wish, Will.”

“I didn’t expect you to look so displeased by it.”

Hannibal’s expression turned apologetic. “Forgive me, Will. I am always pleased by your company here. I am simply concerned that the city guard will see no Roman soldier in you the more you make clear your associations.”

“You fear they will persecute me as they do you.”

“It’s a reasonable concern.”

Will sighed. “It is.” Hesitantly, he walked over to where Hannibal sit sat on the bed and leaned over, taking the other mans’ face in his hands and laying a gentle kiss upon his lips. He felt almost foolish for how his heart pounded, but the pleased surprise in Hannibal’s eyes made it bearable. He stroked his thumbs over high cheekbones and stood back. “Whatever comes, I will be no coward.”

Hannibal lightly ran the back of his fingers over Will’s thigh. “You are certainly no coward, Will.”

“Go have your conversation with Bahadur. I will seek out Caeso and inform him of the decision.” Will stepped back and gave Hannibal room to stand. “I’ll see you back here shortly.” He couldn’t help but flush again as thoughts of what may happen that night intruded upon his thoughts. He felt like a youth, swooning and ridiculous.

With a nod, Hannibal made his way to the door. “Very well. Stay safe, Will.”

Will bit his lip. “You as well.” And he made his way out of the barracks. He made it nearly twenty steps before he heard someone call out to him.

“You! Legionnaire!”

Freezing, Will found himself hesitating. The only people who would refer to him with such a title were no friends of his. When he heard footsteps coming closer, he forced himself to turn around. He felt his heart sink to his greaves when the bulky form of a city guard became visible.

Will wanted to say something, anything, to the man as he approached, but he found his tongue one of solid rock. All he was capable of doing was staring at the oncoming—attacker? Instigator? What was he?

The guard came to a stop further than an arm’s distance away, arms crossed over his chest and no indication of reaching for his sword. Will noticed that he looked uncomfortable, but not angry. This time, he managed to force words from somewhere in the back of his throat and they croaked appropriately.

“What can I do for you?”

The officer squirmed and glanced back over his shoulder like he was afraid he would be overheard. “I am Cyprian.”

Will waited to see what words would follow, but when none did, he cleared his throat. “Hello Cyprian. I am Will.”

For some reason, this seemed to relax the guard ever so slightly. His shoulders lessened in tension and the furrows on his brow smoothed. “Yes. You’re the soldier who befriended the Persians.”

Will felt the hairs stand on the back of his neck, both in indignation and fear, but he tried not to let it show in his voice. “They are not all Persians.” He didn’t know why that was the first thing he said. He wanted to bite his own tongue off.

“They’re not?” Cyprian looked genuinely surprised.

Will sighed and rubbed his fingers into his eyes, having no idea as to where this conversation was headed. “No, they’re not, but many of them are. That should not be such an issue as it seems to be.” He knew he was taking a risk in speaking so bluntly to a city guard, but he had just told Hannibal he was no coward. He had no intentions of going back on those words so quickly.

Cyprian looked behind himself again and Will wondered what in the world he was seeking out. “You’re right, of course.”

Will’s eyebrows must have met his hairline. “You think so?”

For the first time in their interaction, Cyprian’s face showed something other than discomfort. He looked guilty and disappointed. “I grew up in the country near a trading village. Many Easterners came. They look very different. They have no Rome. They sound very different.”

While this man was no skilled linguist, Will recognized the weight of what he was saying and listened intently.

Cyprian shrugged, his heavy armor clinking. “People are different. Right now people here are scared of different and that’s foolish. A warring party from the East attacked the trading village once. Pillaged it. They killed the traders from the East too. The Persians attacking us will attack the Persians here. This, I know.”

Will felt his heart soften ever so slightly. “You are correct about that, yes.”

The affirmation seemed to bolster Cyprian’s confidence. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. Tell you that everyone is being foolish. Tell you not everyone feels that way. I thought it important someone tell you. No one else seemed to want to.”

“There are others that feel as you do?”

Cyprian looked uncomfortable once more and looked over his shoulder. “Not everyone, but some. It isn’t talked about loudly. People are easy to anger right now.”

Will’s curiosity got the better of him. “Who are you looking for?”

“The other guard assigned with me for the night. He went off for a piss.”

Will frowned. “And should I assume he does not share your opinion?”

A deep and resentful grimace. “No.”

The one word was said so finitely and with such dissatisfaction that Will found himself desperately not wanting to meet whomever this other guard was. “I see. Well—” he hesitated, unsure on how to end this terribly unexpected conversation. “Thank you, Cyprian. There needs to be more people like you in the world.”

Cyprian offered a cautious, small smile. Unfortunately, the pleasantness of the moment was cut short but a sound that was most certainly an angry yell. Looking around, both men quickly honed in on the sounds. A scuffle in an alley nearby.

Cursing the fact that he had to endure two such incidents in a single day, Will followed after Cyprian, hand on his gladius just in case.

As they got closer, words began to clearly ring out into the night and Will was horrified by what he heard.

“You don’t belong here you cursed—”

Will felt his stomach heave at the language that followed and blood rushed in his ears, turning everything into a dull, muffled roar. The two of the rounded a corner to find a guard leaning over the crumpled form of a small man, punching him repeatedly in the ribs. The man on the ground was clearly of the auxilia and Will felt a pounding spill of fury bleeding into his chest.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he roared, surprising himself by the ferocity of his own voice. In all his life, Will wasn’t certain he had ever sounded quite like that. His hands were shaking. One palm was grasped tightly on the hilt of his gladius now. It dug painfully into his skin. He was so tired of this—all this hatred and mistrust and contempt perforating the city like a rancid stench. He was so tired.

The guard stood up but didn’t have the decency to look abashed. His face was red with loathing and he looked smug and self-certain.

Will despised him with a desperation usually saved for dying men.

Then, he was finally able to see the poor, beaten soul on the ground. Huddled in on himself, quivering and bleeding, was Firuz.

Will couldn’t believe his eyes. Polite, gentle, kind Firuz bleeding on the ground like a dog. Will hadn’t even known he was advancing until a strong arm caught him in the chest,

knocking the wind from his lungs.

“This is guard business, Legionnaire,” Cyprian said. He gave Will a heavy, meaningful look, begging him to stay put.

Will clenched his teeth and stayed put, turning his attention back to the attacker. “Explain yourself.”

The guard, disgustingly, laughed. “Explain myself? I’m teaching it a lesson. This trash has no place in my city. And neither do you. Probably a spy, you are. Here to kill us all in our sleep.”

Will stared at the other man, uncomprehending. What did one say in response to insanity?

“Titus.” It was Cyprian, slowly placing himself bodily between Will and the other guard. “We were instructed—”

“Burn those instructions!” The man revealed as Titus interrupted. “If we don’t do something, these dark s—”

“Titus!” Cyprian’s tone brooked no argument. “Laurentinus commanded we *guard* the soldiers. All of the soldiers.”

Sneering, Titus turned to spit on the still shaking form of Firuz and Cyprian was forced to hold Will back once more, speaking even as he used his considerable weight to keep Will still. “Laurentinus is our governor. His word is law. You disobey direct orders.”

Titus shrugged, disturbing flippant. “He attacked me.”

Will scowled. “He would never—" Cyprian pushed back at Will gently but sternly.

“You tell me this soldier attacked you unprovoked?”

Another shrug and Titus almost looked gleeful. “Why not? Can you disprove me?”

As glib as the man was, Will saw a cold ice in his eyes that chilled him to the core. He stopped struggling against Cyprian’s grip, beginning to realize what kind of man they were dealing with.

Cyprian took a steadying breath and held up a surrendering hand. “Fine, brother. I see no reason to report this. We should return to our post. Others may come here.”

For the longest, most grueling moment of Will’s life, Titus considered the plea. Eventually, some tension left his form and he seemed ready to concede.

Which was why, of course, things had to take a turn for the worse.

Behind him, Will heard the distinct sound of Persian being spoken. It sounded confused at first, but began to pick up in intensity as it neared him. Will whirled around and felt his chest constrict as the situation spiraled even further out of control. It was Jalil. Firuz’s temperamental brother Jalil.

Gods.

Raising his hands, Will tried to block Jalil from proceeding. “Jalil. Stop, please!”

Unfortunately, Jalil knew precious little of Will’s language, not that Will was entirely sure it would have mattered if he did, considering that was the moment Jalil recognized his little brother in the dirt.

With a shout that made Will’s ears ring, Jalil shoved him aside and stormed at the man standing over Firuz. Will thudded against the wall of the alley from the force of being pushed aside, seeing stars as his head knocked back against the stone. Cyprian tried to make a grab for Jalil but he was of a singular purpose and brushed him aside as though he were a feather, batting the guard away and tackling Titus before he could so much as draw his sword.

Despite being in more battles than he could count on both hands, Will had never grown accustomed to how quickly violence began. It was as though a perfectly sunny day became a violent storm—impossible to process in the moment. But one thing Will could do in moments like this is tend to the wounded. Knowing his strength was no match for the men at odds, Will ducked past Cyprian and knelt next to Firuz, keeping a careful eye on the fight only inches away so he wouldn’t accidentally take an elbow to the face or worse.

Jalil had Titus on his back and was slamming his head repeatedly into the dirt. Will heard a crack and he winced and grabbed Firuz under his arms, deeming it far more important to remove him from the situation entirely rather than examine his wounds. Stumbling, he dragged Firuz out of the alley, sweating and tripping the whole way. He looked up to see that Cyprian had tried to get Jalil off of Titus only to be shoved onto his back for the effort. He was still attempting to get back up and try again when Will let his attention turn to Firuz.

“Firuz, can you hear me?” He began patting his jaw softly, avoiding the swollen and bleeding left side of his face that was crusted with dirt and gods knew what else.

Firuz’s eyes’ fluttered open and he spoke weakly, voice drowned out by new shouts and footsteps entering the fray. Ignoring the desire to see who else had arrived on the scene—partly in fear that it would simply be more guards and Jalil might not live to see the morning sun—Will leaned close.

“Say that again?”

Firuz frowned, looking despairing at his own wounds and circumstance. “I am alright.”

Will chose not to comment on the farce of the statement. “You need to be tended to. Does anything feel broken?” There were so many people shouting now. Will couldn’t make out how many voices there were. Whatever was happening, the violence was clearly over and arguments were being made. Sighing, he helped heave Firuz into a sitting position. “Can you stand?”

Firuz took a moment to catalogue himself, flexing fingers and shifting legs. He looked for an instant as though he would say he was incapable, but then he nodded and put an arm around

Will's shoulders for support. "I heard my brother," he said softly. There was fear there. Worry.

Will didn't reply, helping the other man to his feet and resolutely guiding him towards the entrance of the barracks. It was only when they were about to round the corner completely that he chanced a look back into the alley. He almost made the mistake of relaxing his shoulders in relief when he saw the men who had arrived were of the century. Roman soldiers and not the city guard. Instead, he tightened his grip on Firuz and carried onward with a hesitant, but relieved vigor. "Come now. Let's tend to you."

Firuz didn't argue.

.

Will took a deep breath and let it free into the night, running a thumb along the forearm wrapped around his chest. Hannibal held him closely, pressed up against his back under the blanket as they both sorted through their own individual thoughts after the events of the evening.

The intention of intimacy that night had long since been forgotten in the stress of happenings, sacrificed in favor of comfort.

Will shut his eyes and savored the warmth of his companion. "After the war, we could live somewhere together. Away from all of this. In peace." He wasn't entirely sure what had possessed him to say it. A sad, exhausted desire for respite in imaginings, perhaps. He tried to overcome his self-conscious instincts when he felt Hannibal tense.

Despite his physical reaction, Hannibal humored him verbally. "A lovely image, most certainly."

Will's eyes opened and he stared blankly into the blackness of the room. He chewed his lip. "Tell me."

Hannibal finally relaxed, perhaps in confusion. "Tell you what?"

Will rolled onto his back to look at Hannibal, forcing the other man to shift backwards to accommodate him. It seemed a foolish thing to do. They could barely see one another even with their eyes adjusted to the dark pitch, but it just seemed more appropriate to have such conversations face to face. "You think it impossible."

The hesitance that Hannibal displayed then was entirely uncharacteristic of him. "Not necessarily."

Will felt frustration tickling at the edge of his consciousness. "Hannibal."

Sighing, Hannibal idly stroked his fingers over Will's sternum. "That is not my struggle."

"Then tell me. Please."

Surprisingly, Hannibal chuckled. "Surely you must know that I love you, Will."

Now entirely bewildered and with a pounding heart to accompany his bafflement, Will's mouth fell open silently. "I--ah."

Not the most eloquent response to such a confession.

Another chuckle, tired but genuine. "Surely you knew."

Will waited many long moments for his pulse to calm and his thoughts to unmix themselves. "I…" he trailed off. His tongue felt dry but he licked his lips anyway. "Yes, I think I knew. And you know that I…" He lost the stamina to continue, unsure as to why he couldn't force the words past his lips. He meant them. He knew he did. But sound failed him so utterly and completely in that moment.

Hannibal reached up to cup Will's face affectionately. "Yes. I know."

Will swallowed. "Alright. Good." Then, after a brief stint of silence as they both absorbed the declarations, Will realized the distraction for what it was. "That wasn't what bothered you."

With a huff, Hannibal put his hand back on Will's chest. "I was hoping you would forget."

"I haven't."

Apparently realizing Will wouldn't allow him to dodge this eternally, Hannibal finally acquiesced. "That *is* what vexes me, in truth."

"I don't understand."

"I love you, Will. Quite terribly and completely." Hannibal spoke as though he was revealing a horrific secret about himself. "I wish to find that peace with you. I wish for that."

"And that's—" Will had been about to question things but Hannibal's hand flexed against his tunic and he silenced himself.

"I wish for that," Hannibal continued. "I have never wished for peace or someone to share that peace with. I have had no need for such fantasies. I have never had something that I do not wish to lose, Will. Do you understand? I am the man I have become and have been capable of being because I have possessed no fear."

Will felt a heavy stone in his chest as understanding began to dawn. He remained silent.

Hannibal ran a hand across Will's torso and gripped fingers into his side, holding as though he feared Will might simply float away. "I fear, Will. I fear for you. I fear I will not survive to find peace with you. Or that you will not. This fear concerns me greatly."

Will hadn't the slightest idea how to comfort the other man in this moment, but he tried. He placed a hand on Hannibal's. "I understand. You think this will make you a less effective warrior."

"I do not know."

“I’m unaccustomed to you not knowing,” Will admitted.

Hannibal laced their fingers together. “I am human, Will.”

“I wish you weren’t. I wish you were a god.”

“You envision us immortal and untouchable? Endless as time?”

“Not me.” Will flexed his hand in Hannibal’s grip. “Just you.”

“What is eternity alone?”

Will turned his head and leaned so he could press their foreheads together. “I don’t think that —” He stopped himself and tried again, rearranging his thoughts. “Fear is not what kills men. Fear means that you have something worth fighting for. What kills men is having nothing at the end of the road.”

Hannibal mulled this over. “Is this what you believe? Or are you simply trying to convince me so I do not lose faith?”

“I must believe it,” Will replied with more confidence than he truly felt. “I cannot abide by a world where loving someone can be the death of a man.”

Hannibal breathed deep and pressed their foreheads together more firmly. “Indeed.”

.

Will was unsure how long he had been sitting on the bench outside of the auguraculum. He could hear voices inside, but his thoughts were consumed by his conversation with Hannibal the night prior. The two of them had fallen asleep shortly after their tense discussion of love and the future, both exhausted beyond repair. Will had been woken by Caeso’s arrival at the auxilia barracks, informing them that Jalil had been taken into custody and Will’s testimony would be needed before the afternoon was over.

Hannibal’s confessions, for there had been multiple, weighed on him heavily. He had never felt so torn in his life. To have both a profession of love and a revelation of dread mixed into the same breath was difficult to process.

Unfortunately, Will was given no more time to consider the turns his life had taken.

“Will.”

Will looked up to see Caeso standing in the entrance of the auguraculum. His face was strained and gaunt with stress.

“It’s time. Laurentinus wishes to speak with you.”

The sickly slime of dread swirled to life in Will’s stomach and he stood. “Alright.”

Caeso stopped him with a hand on his shoulder as he walked forward. He gave him what was surely an attempt at a comforting look. The look was heavily clouded by doubt despite his best intentions. “Just speak honestly. You are in no trouble.”

Will shrugged and nodded. He wasn’t concerned with his own wellbeing.

They entered.

There were more people inside than Will had been expecting. Laurentinus stood on the far side, arms clasped behind his back in the way that only a war-weary general could stand. Both Bahadur and Hannibal were off to the left, looking entirely out of place and simultaneously well-aware of the fact and entirely comfortable with it. Their faces were grim. Caeso moved to stand beside Decimus, who looked more gloomy than Will had ever seen him. Another man clad in guard armor and looking sufficiently important was standing by the doorway.

Will stepped forward and tried his best to stand tall and self-assured. He avoided looking at Hannibal and met Laurentinus’ stare. “Sir.”

“Immunes Willhelm.” Laurentinus sounded defeated. “Why is it that I always seem to find you at the center of such catastrophic events?” Despite the words, his voice didn’t seem to hold any accusation.

“I do not know, sir.” Will shifted on his feet. “I would very much prefer it not to be the case.”

Laurentinus grunted. “I’m sure.” He paced, then, and looked this way and that, eyes focusing on nothing in particular. Eventually, he stilled and returned his gaze to Will. “Out with it then. Tell me, briefly, what happened. No pretty words, legionnaire. The facts.”

Steeling himself, Will did his best to recount the night’s events without emotion. “Guard Cyprian and I heard a commotion in the alley. We approached to discover guard Titus beating an auxilia soldier on the ground and shouting accusations of him being a traitor and unwelcome. We attempted to intervene when another auxilia soldier encountered us and attacked Titus.” Will paused and swallowed roughly. “At which point I removed the beaten soldier from the alley to tend to him and soldiers of the legion arrived shortly thereafter.”

The silence that followed his report was so long that Will found himself fighting the urge to squirm with increasing intensity.

Laurentinus’ face revealed nothing. “I notice that you named the guards but not the soldiers of the auxilia. Am I to believe you did not know them?”

Will froze, feeling as though he had somehow been caught in a lie. “Forgive me, sir. The auxilia soldier that was being beaten was Firuz and the one who attacked Titus was Jalil.”

“They are brothers, are they not?”

“Yes, sir.” Will felt ashamed to realize that his voice was shaking.

Laurentinus smiled, but it was a tired thing. “I’m well aware of what your feelings on this matter are, Willhelm. I expected bias. Do not concern yourself.”

Will couldn’t find the strength to feel convinced.

“You say that you attempted to intervene,” Laurentinus continued without waiting for a reply. “Was Titus receptive to your intervention?”

Will frowned despite himself. He forced the defensiveness he felt to take a step back. Now was not the time. “I am uncertain. He was not initially receptive, but he may have been starting to consider us before the end. I am unsure.”

Laurentinus nodded. “Is your assertion that Titus was the instigator of this incident?”

“I do not know for certain, sir. We arrived after it began, but—”

Laurentinus held up a hand. “I do not wish for your speculations, legionnaire.”

Will felt a spike of irritation, but his jaw snapped shut obediently.

Scrubbing a large hand over his face, the legatus augusti turned to the man dressed in the guard armor. “Titus is to be stripped of rank and will no longer be a member of the guard.”

The man looked like he was barely containing his disgust. “But sir—”

“Enough!” Laurentinus barked. His patience was clearly starting to fray. “I have had enough of this damnable conflict within my own walls! The emperor arrives in not but days and I will not have him entering into this chaos. We will have order.” He moved his gaze to Hannibal. “We must engage a balanced response. Titus has been stripped of rank, but the people will not tolerate this without equal measures from the auxilia.”

Hannibal shut his eyes, defeated, but nodded. “I assumed this.”

Laurentinus looked appeased when he discovered that he would not be argued with again. “Jalil attacked Titus when the conflict had been in the process of resolution. If I allow this to pass the people will surely riot in protest. Jalil must leave this city. For his own safety as well as the continued stability of Antioch.”

Will unthinkingly opened his mouth to protest but was swiftly interrupted by Caeso making an aborted step forward and shaking his head. Luckily, Laurentinus either didn’t notice or chose to ignore the near outburst.

Hannibal looked resolved in his acceptance of the situation in a way that only a leader could manage. “Will you allow us a day to supply and prepare him?”

“I will. But no longer.”

Hannibal nodded. “And his brother?”

Laurentinus frowned. “He may remain, but you must understand, commander.” He shook his head and rubbed his face again. “You must maintain with your men that reciprocity is not an option here. You know how tenuous this situation is. There is bigotry at play here. No one with sense is denying this, but you absolutely must convince your men that it is to be tolerated to the best of their ability. There is more at stake here than pride or revenge.”

Bahadur looked away to hide his expression, but Hannibal simply nodded again. “Agreed.”

Despite the agreement, Laurentinus looked displeased. Whether it was from the situation or something else entirely, Will couldn’t be sure. “Very well. Decimus, prepare men from the cohort to take over the duties of guarding the auxilia appointments. I think it best if the city guard maintains a wide berth from this point forward.”

Decimus nodded and acknowledged the order.

Will frowned as he looked at Caeso, puzzled as to why the order hadn’t been given to him. Caeso’s face gave nothing away. Will resolved to ask him later.

“And you, Willhelm.”

Will’s eyes snapped back to Laurentinus. “Sir?”

Laurentinus searched Will’s face for an inordinate amount of time, searching for something that only he knew. “Cease finding yourself in these situations or I will be forced to consider that I may need to find you concerning.”

Will’s spine felt stiff from how still he was standing. “Yes, sir.”

“Very well.” Laurentinus waved a hand and turned away from the entire group. “You all have your orders. Leave me be so I may lament my career in peace.”

Everyone left in total silence. Hannibal nodded at Will before taking off to perform what was to be the solemn task of banishing one of his own men. Bahadur gave Will a small smile before following. Decimus and the man who Will assumed to be the guard commander both left to their respective tasks.

Caeso and Will walked soundlessly all the way down to the edge of the trade quarter before stopping.

“That was the best it could have gone,” Caeso said.

Will stared at the sky. “Maybe.”

“It was.”

Nodding halfheartedly, Will turned and looked at his friend, searching. “Why did Laurentinus give that command to Decimus? As legatus it is your responsibility.”

“He was simply delegating.” Caeso’s response was dismissive—avoidant.

“Caeso…”

Caeso gave Will an apologetic look. “You worry too much, Will. Let it lie. For now, please?”

Entirely displeased but recognizing that he wouldn’t win this battle, Will held his hands up in surrender. “You will tell me when you are able?”

With a wan smile, Caeso squeezed Will’s shoulder. “I always do.”

They began walking back to their barracks, keen to put the day behind them.

As they walked, Will felt the distinct pull of fate tugging at his heels, threatening to trip him with every step. He knew, somehow, that all of this was far from over. Emperor Severus would arrive soon and everything would change.

Only time would tell what that change would be.

And all Will could do was wait.

Chapter End Notes

There. The first chapter in years. I hope it was a decent comeback. It's been so long since I've written.

I'm incredibly sorry for putting this on hold for as long as I did.

Thank you to everyone who has shown this story such love and patience over the years.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

> “You have become a part of me so expediently and without reservation that sometimes I fear I have lost myself already. I would burn worlds for you.”

Chapter Notes

> I started this fic nearly a decade ago now, which is wild to realize. It’s by sheer, enduring stubbornness that I’m showing up again after nearly three years. I’ve thought about finishing this countless times. Some might even argue this story has plagued me just a little.
>
> I have gone over my old outlines and re-researched the campaign of Alexander Severus and the plans have changed a bit. The story will now be 22 chapters in total.
>
> To anyone who read this over the years and is back: I hope life has treated you well and I can’t thank you enough for coming back.
>
> I might not update within any reasonable timeframe, but damned if I’m just going to leave this unfinished forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For some reason, Will had expected Jalil to be ushered out of the city in the dead of night. In hindsight, the expectation had been foolish. The entire purpose of his expulsion was to set an example to the inhabitants that punishment was being enacted on both sides of the conflict. The circumstances were to be visibly noted to silence any discord that would arise at the revelation that a city guard had been dismissed in the wake of the incident.

Jalil left when the afternoon sun was high and the streets densely populated. He stared unwaveringly at nothing as the citizens of Antioch stretched their necks to get a good glimpse of the Persian being cast from the auxilia, jaw set and eyes hard and defeated. Jalil had been given provisions and was not being escorted out under guard.

Will supposed it was a small mercy.

Bahadur had joined Will to bid farewell to Jalil. Whether it was at Hannibal’s behest or simply because Bahadur was concerned in his own right that Will would struggle with the event, Will didn’t know, but he was grateful for what had become a reliable and steady

presence at his side. Will had fully prepared to watch this indignity in silence, but he gasped when he saw that Jalil was not alone as Hannibal walked him to the gates.

“Is that Firuz?” Will looked quickly over at his companion in confusion and concern. “Laurentinus said that Firuz...” He trailed off at the look on Bahadur’s face. It was resigned and Will understood. “He would not leave his brother’s side.”

“Did you expect anything less?” The question wasn’t asked cruelly. It was tired.

Will sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. What little energy he had remaining in his limbs felt depleted and he sagged. “No. If anything I’m surprised I expected differently.”

Bahadur settled a warm hand on Will’s shoulder, a commiserating point of contact. He offered no reassurances. Silently, they stood together and watched the brothers leave. No words needed to be spoken of the injustice of it all. They both knew.

Will had departed quickly after the whole affair, not wishing to contribute to the crowd of gawking onlookers for longer than he needed to. He considered seeking out Hannibal but thought against it in the end. The man would likely be spending the day attempting to bolster the morale of his own troops after everything that had happened. Will wondered how successful he would be.

The day found him wandering the streets of Antioch. The people were practically tittering with gossip over the events of the past week. Buildings burning down, fights breaking out, it was all terribly exciting to them in a way that made Will’s stomach turn and his nose twitch. Rather than dedicate more focus than was deserved on the ignorance, he found his thoughts turning to Laurentinus’ words to him. Words of warning—or perhaps threat.

Cease finding yourself in these situations or I will be forced to consider that I may need to find you concerning.

The consequences of such concerns were left unspoken. Will knew better at this point than to try and determine the general’s innermost thoughts. The man had remained unpredictable, his plans and machinations beyond Will’s scope of experience. Perhaps Hannibal would understand further what Laurentinus’ designs were. Even more likely, Caeso would know.

Will frowned. Caeso had been avoidant in a way that was excessive even for him. He had always struggled between his friendship with Will and the decorum required of his rank, but the friendship had almost always won out thus far. This time, Will felt like there was a gaping chasm of unspoken truths between them. The concern he felt for Caeso ached in his chest, but there was absolutely nothing he could do to ease the strain.

He was tired of feeling helpless.

His thoughts meandered on like this for some time. He lost himself to quiet and despondent ruminations so deeply that it was a genuine shock to his system when he bumped into someone who had stepped into his path.

Will looked up to apologize for his carelessness only to see Valerian smiling sadly down at him. “Oh!”

Valerian’s smile widened, if only slightly. The weight of Jove’s absence and the happenings of the day were clear in every line of his face. “Oh indeed. Hello, Will.”

Will allowed himself to relax in stilted increments. The two men looked at each other for the longest time, neither knowing how to start a conversation in the midst of everything. Will finally settled on: “We’ve had better days.”

Valerian snorted. “We’ve had worse, too.”

“I suppose we have.”

More silence quickly followed. It was not the awkward kind—simply exhausted and lost.

“Let’s drink,” Valerian said suddenly, watching the people mill about the streets.

Startled, Will nodded. Though he would often join them when they went drinking, Valerian was rarely the one to suggest it.

They walked in a slow and companionable silence towards the tavern, settled in knowing one another well enough to be comfortable in the quiet when times were difficult. Will found, as he often did, a deep wellspring of gratefulness for his friends bubbling to the surface of his sternum and slowly eroding away at the hopelessness he’d been feeling.

The quiet endured until long after they had been brought wine and bread. Valerian was once again the one to break to moment with a non sequitur, but this one was far more startling than the last.

“Do you love Hannibal, Will?”

Heart suddenly in his throat, Will was certain he looked like a spooked horse. “I--what?”

Valerian’s smile was forgiving. “You heard me clearly enough.”

A part of Will wanted to look around the tavern to see if anyone was listening in to their conversation. He didn’t. “Why are you asking me this?”

“I don’t know.” Valerian grimaced and looked away for a moment, emotions passing over his face in rapid flickers. “I suppose in part it is selfish inquiry. A need for commiseration.”

Understanding dawned. “You fear for Jove so greatly?”

“No. I simply...” Valerian licked his lips and ran a finger along the side of his cup. “I don’t know what to do with myself without him here.”

Will felt his heart shiver with compassion as he realized why Valerian had sought him out. As a man who loved a man, he had needed someone to see his loneliness and understand it with the acuteness of someone who knew a particular kind of love. Will had never truly considered

how they might relate to each other in such a way. His relationship with Hannibal had always felt so *other* and separate from everything around him that he rarely considered it in such a context. But now that Valerian was sitting here in front of him, looking alone and unmoored and needing to be understood, Will knew that their two relationships were not so different after all.

He felt unwise and arrogant for considering himself so irredeemably unique.

He took a sip of his wine and gave Valerian the response that Will knew he deserved. One of honesty. “Every moment I spend apart from Hannibal feels as though I have left something terribly important in another room. I feel as though I have forgotten to bring a necessity with me.” The relief in Valerian’s countenance was immediate and Will felt terribly guilty. “I’m sorry. I never considered how--” He hesitated. “How you and I might relate so distinctively amongst our friends on this topic.”

There was no blame in Valerian’s gaze, only understanding. “I imagine your circumstances are far more complicated than even mine.”

“It isn’t what I would call simple,” Will agreed. “Not that you and Jove have ever had it simple either.”

“Jove isn’t the captain of a foreign detachment whose group has been repeatedly and perpetually ostracized by the city in which they reside,” Valerian murmured. Will barely heard him. “You never were one to choose the easy way, were you?”

“I thought I was. It seems I was fooling myself.”

Valerian seemed to consider his next question with a seriousness that made Will entirely too nervous. “And you haven’t considered the practicality of seeing your entanglement meet an end?”

Will was stunned by how the question made his heart nearly stop in his chest. It was as though he had suddenly been pierced with an arrow on the battlefield. He felt defenseless.

The horror must have shown on Will’s face because Valerian quickly backtracked. “Forget I asked. I see the question was a thoughtless one. I, too, would never be able to make such a decision.”

Humiliated when he realized his eyes were stinging, Will blinked rapidly and looked down at the table. “Am I a fool?”

“Yes.”

Will’s head shot up in disbelief.

Valerian smiled. “But love makes fools of us all.”

.

Emperor Alexander Severus arrived three days later. There was warning, of course. Messengers had ridden ahead to the city to begin preparations for his arrival, but despite the notice the people and soldiers alike were abuzz with excitement and trepidation both. After all, the empire was vast and the emperor was a sight most would not witness in their lifetimes.

Commoners and nobles alike crowded the streets as Severus arrived with a not lackluster army in tow. Will was surprised at the size his complement. It wasn't a full cohort, but three centuries at least. Near 250 men filed into the city, with horses and carts and exhausted but sturdy faces. Will tried to spot Jove in the hoard but was unsuccessful.

As a Roman soldier, he knew he was expected to feel at the very least some level of dutiful fervor at the arrival of the emperor, but all he could muster was a tremulous discontent that he managed to mask into a seriousness that could be explained away by circumstance. A quick glance to his fellow soldiers told Will that their feelings were much the same. There was a relief in knowing that he was not the only one who knew this to be no happy affair.

Alexander wasn't here for a holiday, after all.

Against all reason, Will ducked back further towards the alleys of the buildings as the emperor passed. A woman was beside him, seeming regal and altogether pleased at the excitement of the city folk. Will knew there was no reason—no chance—in which he would be noticed, but recent events had made him feel far too seen by his superiors and he had a paranoia that gripped him at the base of his spine at all hours of the day.

I may need to find you concerning.

Will swallowed and looked at the dirt at his feet. Let no one find him concerning, he begged silently to anyone or anything that could hear him. For once in months, let him pass by unnoticed.

He breathed an illogical but genuine sigh of relief when the group passed him by. As much as they could pass, that is. Antioch was a well-sized city to be certain, but it was now stacked to the brim with over 400 of the legion and there was no doubt in Will's mind that the number would only grow exponentially as the inevitable war drew closer.

"Do you think he'll make a speech?"

Will started and looked to his left. There stood Cimon, tall and stallwart as ever. He had a secret, irreverent smile on his face saved only for Will.

Will returned the smile in kind. "I've no idea. I've never been visited by an emperor before."

"You make it sound as though he's visited you personally."

Will paled at the accidental reference to his internal dialogue and felt like a silly child. He covered it with a roll of his eyes. "You know precisely what I meant."

Cimon wiggled his eyebrows down at Will, but the expression shuttered for the briefest of moments as he glanced around at the newly arrived soldiers now filling the streets. “Our number grows.”

It wasn’t said with relief.

Will frowned. The weight of the world seemed to be slowly pressing into his bones. “Yes. So it would seem.”

.

As it happened, Severus made no speech. He sequestered himself away in one of the more stately buildings at the center of the city, surrounded by his personal century who quickly occupied a newly appointed barracks nearby.

The civilians seemed disappointed but carried about their business after some whispers. Will’s century was significantly more subdued. The arrival of the emperor and more soldiers had solidified a reality that few were ready to accept despite having known it was coming for some months now. They all moved slowly around the barracks, stilted by the tar-like presence of bad tidings.

All the officers had vanished, likely to greet the new arrivals and receive their marching orders. Will had chewed his thumbnail to a nub waiting for a sight of Caeso—for an inkling of what they should expect.

It was hours before information was brought to them. By then, most of the soldiers had holed up around tables and stools, banding together like they were huddling for warmth. The comfort of a worry shared en masse. Jove had returned sometime during the wait. He sat next to Will and bumped their shoulders together. They didn’t speak.

It wasn’t fear that robbed the voices of the men, but anticipation. They wanted to know their fate, regardless of what it was.

The muteness of the building was suffocating.

When Caeso, Valerian, Decimus, and the other officers stepped in through the door, they all froze as more than sixty sets of eyes turned upon them at once.

Caeso cleared his throat uncomfortably, shaking off the clear fatigue set around his shoulders, and shifted into a parade rest. He looked ever the leader Will knew him to be.

“The emperor has arrived to make a defensive capitol of Antioch,” he said. It was a pointless statement that needed to be said regardless. “His complement was the first of many. We are expecting seven more cohorts here at least and legions more to be formed in the east along the border.”

There was shuffling and muted whispers. Will’s eyes widened. Seven cohorts was almost 600 men. And thousands along the border? It was all but a direct confirmation of war declared. It had to be.

As if sensing these exact concerns among the men, Caeso continued quickly. “That being said, the emperor would like me to impress upon you that these are defensive and cautionary measures, nothing more.” And Will saw it then—something in Caeso’s eyes that spoke of a significant discord. Caeso was holding something back; intensely so. He hesitated briefly before continuing. “The emperor intends to send ambassadors to Syria to negotiate a peace with Ardashir.”

Will shut his eyes as the murmurs became grumbles and grew louder still. Voices began to pick up over the din.

“Ardashir has already made moves on the border!”

“Certainly we don’t mean to do nothing!”

“What of the generals?”

“And if he refuses?”

Caeso’s eyes grew hard but he levelled his quelling gaze at no one in particular, knowing full well he could not punish them all for their insolence and that he needed to make his stance firm immediately or lose the faith entirely. “IF!” he bellowed. Will winced, unused to hearing that volume from his friend’s lips. The room fell silent and Caeso spoke again, more calmly but with no less foreboding. “ *If* he refuses, then we will decide our next moves. I will not have pointless prognostication, do you understand me? It is not for us to question the emperor, but to serve him and the empire as we are duty bound to do.”

In that moment Caeso may as well have been eight feet tall for all the command he exuded. Will was proud of him. Caeso’s eyes travelled around the room as though looking at each soldier individually. His voice was hard. “Do I make myself clear?”

Nods and downcast eyes. Murmurs of “sir” and “yes sir” and bitten lips to stop retorts. The men were chastised and the emotions simmered back down to a manageable level.

It was only since Will knew Caeso so well that he could see the cautious and tremulous relief behind his eyes. Their gazes met and Will put as much support into his stare as he could manage.

Caeso took a deep breath and nodded at the officers who all milled out of the room, likely to further their discussions privately. Valerian and Jove shared a brief look of longing before Valerian joined them and Will felt a sudden and searing need to see Hannibal.

Caeso remained for a moment, contemplative and silent as the room continued to watch him. Will would shrink to nothing under such scrutiny.

Eventually, Caeso took a deep breath. His red hair looked dulled to a pale orange by the light of the room and strain of the day. “I expect all of you to carry yourself with a dignity worthy of the legion. We are not the only century here anymore. Show the others why we are the best.” With one last, hard look at the occupants, he followed after the other officers.

Will slumped against Jove who took his weight with grace and patience.

“Miss me?” Jove inquired. He knocked his cheek against the top of Will’s head affectionately.

“Not as much as some,” Will said meaningfully. Jove hummed and his eyes drifted to where the officers had exited. “But yes, I missed you. We all did.”

“I’m glad it was Caeso that delivered the news,” came Tertius’ voice from beside them.

Will sat straighter and regarded him curiously. “What makes you say that?”

Tertius glanced about the room, but all the soldiers were lost in their own conversations now. Many were leaving now that the news was broken. “Decimus has been giving increasing orders as of late. I had feared...” He tapped his knees and let the sentence hang in the air.

Will nodded. He hadn’t been sure if the others would have noticed the difference. He was uncertain if Caeso had told any of them about the possible promotion to the emperor’s personal guard. “It’s possible recent complications have necessitated delegation.” His words were careful.

Tertius and Jove both gave him odd looks and Will resolutely did not meet their gazes.

“Yes.” Tertius sounded dubious at best. “Even so, it’s good to hear something like this from him. News like this from Decimus would have doubtless been far more grating. Tempers may not have been--”

“As well managed,” Jove finished for him.

Tertius nodded.

Will rubbed his forehead. “He seemed disconcerted.”

“He has many reasons to be.”

Frowning, Will wrung his hands together. “Yes.”

“You fear it’s more.” Jove wasn’t asking.

Will’s head thunked against the wall behind him with a blunt thud. “Yes.”

Jove seemed to think on this for a moment. Will noticed then that Jove’s eyes hadn’t left the door through which Valerian had exited. Jove blinked, but his gaze remained steadfast. “We’ll hear nothing more of it tonight, either way.”

Once again, Will felt overcome by the need to see Hannibal. There was no longer a reason to stay in wait. The news was given. The war was postponed for the time being, or so it seemed. He stood. “I’m--” he stuttered to a halt. He had never quite announced his intentions to see Hannibal so baldly. It had almost always been timed more conveniently somehow, taking away his need to state it outright. He found himself hovering in indecision.

Jove took pity. “You think I’m not much the same? Go, Will.”

Will smiled and made his exit gratefully. His friends did him the dignity of not watching him leave.

Night had crept upon the city seemingly without warning. Everything had unnaturally paused within the barracks. Waiting for a determination of one’s fate had a tendency to alter the perception of time. When Will stepped out from the stifling atmosphere within, he felt freer than he had in some time. His brow twitched in confusion at his own impulse towards contentment. By all accounts he should be feeling as frustrated and impotent as the rest of his century, but he found he couldn’t quite grasp at that thread.

No, instead Will felt a profound sense of solace. The unwarranted nature of it almost stopped him short, but he shook it off and set out towards the auxilia’s appointments. There was finally a moment of pause where he might, for the first time in what felt like a long while, have an uninterrupted moment with Hannibal. He wasn’t about to sacrifice that opportunity in favor of brooding over what amounted to a good mood.

He half expected to be stopped by Bahadur when he entered the ground floor. Surely the other man had been apprised of the current circumstances and would have arrived back at a similar time to Caeso and the rest, but the floor was conspicuously absent of familiar faces. Will resolved to discuss the situation with Bahadur later and made his way up to Hannibal’s room. No one paid him any mind. They hadn’t in some time.

Will’s memory shuddered back to the first day he had met Hannibal, crossing the river into his encampment to make good of his skills for someone in need. The men had regarded him with thinly veiled suspicion then. He wondered when exactly that had stopped. When he tried, he couldn’t pick the moment exactly.

“Ever lost in your own thoughts.”

Will looked up to see Hannibal standing in the hall and smiling at him fondly.

“It seems to have become an even more grievous habit as of late.” Will returned the smile, but it was self-deprecating.

Hannibal walked into his room and Will followed, shutting the door behind them. The moment stretched lazily as Hannibal paced around, divesting himself of his outerwear and setting about to end his day. Will wandered into the midst of it, enjoying the casual welcome of his presence far more than he’d ever admit. He took the initiative and began to remove his own armor, setting it aside without preamble. Hannibal watched him wordlessly, unreadable but at ease.

Finally, Hannibal ceased his movements and came to a stop in front of Will, running his large palms over shoulders shielded now only by cloth. He seemed to contemplate his words as he stood there, a habit he had begun to develop as steadily as Will had to flights of distraction. When he spoke, he didn’t look Will in the eyes, but it wasn’t an avoidant thing. He simply seemed lost in thought. His eyes were wandering over Will’s body as if to confirm for himself that Will was solid and real.

“I assume Caeso returned with news of the emperor’s plans?”

Will lifted a hand to brace it on Hannibal’s stomach. He felt loose and unsteady from the heavy, warm pressure of the hands on his arms. “He did.”

The gentle touches seemed to come from both of them unbidden. It was like water lapping at the beach during the warmth of summer. A touch here, a stroke there. Hannibal slid his fingers into Will’s hair at his nape and brushed at the skin. “I expected you to be less at ease about the news.”

Will sucked his lip into his mouth. Hannibal watched it go. “I expected that too, but I feel strangely calm about it all.”

“Oh?” The single syllable was filled with a myriad of questions.

Will moved his hands underneath Hannibal’s tunic. He savored the heat of his skin. “Most of the others are disquieted,” he murmured. He felt the stomach under his fingers quiver. It was softer than it had any right to be. “But I find myself...” He looked into Hannibal’s eyes then, hoping to find answers there. “Relieved? I’m not sure why.”

Hannibal’s hand slid from Will’s hair to cup his face. His face was painted with affection. “And you came to me for insight?”

Will allowed himself to wonder on his motives for a moment. Then, he smiled with a shy confidence that he felt was long-earned. “No. Not really.”

Will would never cease to be amazed at how quickly Hannibal’s eyes could darken. The Persian opened his mouth for the barest of moments, about to speak, but seemed to think better of it and adopted a smirk instead before he began to walk Will back towards the bed.

Will’s heart instantly began to pound like a war drum and he felt dizzy from the rush of blood. They had time now, he realized. Time to focus on nothing but each other, even if it was just for this moment. Oh please, let them have time. Let there be no sounds of swords or shouting. Let there be no heat of an unwelcome fire. *Gods* , Will thought, *give me this night.* He felt positively giddy from the potential. Arousal was a surprisingly secondary concern to the pure and unadulterated desire to simply have a moment in Hannibal’s company unimpeded.

He prayed to gods he didn’t believe in when Hannibal kissed him. He called upon names he barely knew as they fell to the bed, wrapped up in each other’s arms and tasting slowly as though they had all the time in the world. He gripped Hannibal’s clothes so hard they might very well rip as Hannibal mouthed at his neck. Because maybe, just maybe, if Will held on tightly enough then the moment would never end.

They moved like they were wading through the deepest waters. Waves rolling against each other with purpose. And then Will opened his eyes, their gazes met, and things changed.

It was as though they both realized simultaneously that this was a singular opportunity afforded to them and abruptly they were both entirely too desperate not to let it pass them by.

Hannibal attacked his mouth with a fervor, his tongue pushing Will's away without a care as he showed him exactly what he intended to do that night. Will moaned, greedily taking advantage of Hannibal's mouth muffling the sound. They were both pulling at clothes and struggling from their refusal to end the kiss. The bottom halves came off long before their tunics and it was only as they were both gasping from the rub of sensitive skin that they managed to tear off the rest of their clothes with an urgency that hadn't even consumed them during their first time at the riverside, when both were bloody and bruised from fighting.

Then they were completely nude and it was altogether too much and exquisitely wonderful as Will wrapped his arms and legs around the man above him like he was trying to absorb him into himself. And maybe he was. Once the thought had crossed his mind, Will found it to be an entirely satisfying concept. The two of them melted together like metal in a forge—merging into one terrible, wonderful, powerful thing that could only be crafted by the most skilled hands.

"You're in your head again," Hannibal panted, using his thumb to push Will's chin and force his head back into the pillow beneath it.

Will bit his lip and Hannibal rewarded him by reaching down and palming him where he needed it. Will's first attempt at a reply was a broken inhale. "N-no I'm not," he managed after a moment.

Hannibal stroked him slowly and his smirk was back on his lips. "Oh?" And this was laced with a thousand questions too, but this time of a different sort.

"No." Will grit his teeth and his legs fell back down to the bed so he could move into the hand that was tearing him apart so easily. " *You're* in my head. You're inside me even now." He held Hannibal's eyes with his own and reached a hand up to grip dark hair between his fingers, pulling. He spoke from the depth of the ache in his gut and the shivers in his flesh. "I feel you. In me. I feel you there."

Hannibal's eye drooped and mouth opened in a silent expression of pleasure and Will felt powerful. Will had brought him to that place with only a few words. He felt strong in a way he never had before. Here was Hannibal, a man of prowess and poise and confidence, succumbing here in Will's arms to nothing but his words. It made him drunk. He used his grip on Hannibal's hair to pull him closer, to bite at his lips, to whisper his pleas into his mouth. "I want to feel more of you," he breathed, and Hannibal groaned.

Hannibal pulled away to reach gracelessly over the side of the bed. Will ran a hand down his outstretched back. He traced the slowly healing scar from the wound Hannibal had received the first night they kissed. A whimper in the back of his mind hoped that their lives would not always be pleasure mixed with pain.

Hannibal returned to him quickly, a bottle of oil in his hand and his eyes alight with wildfire.

Will laughed. "You were keeping that under your bed?"

A kiss, fervent and forceful. "It seems to have been the right choice." Hannibal's voice was destroyed. His accent was growing thicker by the second. Will submerged himself into every

heartbeat of the moment like blood soaking into soil.

He wanted to say something witty but Hannibal seemed keen to waste no more time because Will hadn't even seen him open the bottle and yet his fingers were already there, slick and breaching. No pomp and ceremony. They had waited too long.

Hannibal hitched one of Will's legs up with his elbow and opened him without the usual level of patience he carried about himself. It didn't hurt. It skirted the edges of pain blissfully, adrenaline and arousal far too gone to let it be anything other than good. They were staring openly at each other's faces, panting like they'd been training for hours, wordless in their anxiousness to keep going. Will's fingers flexed in Hannibal's hair. Hannibal's fingers flexed in Will. And it was the best kind of torment.

A not unpleasant panic gripped Will's chest. He wasn't certain if it was simply need or something more, but his fortitude shattered and he lifted his free leg to pull at Hannibal's lower back. "I can't. Please, Hannibal." He leaned up and kissed him, deep and wet, before falling back to the bed. "I can't keep waiting. I can't."

So Hannibal didn't make him. He removed his fingers, buried his face in Will's neck, hefted his leg up so far it made Will's thigh tremble, and he pushed in.

Will had expected Hannibal to go slow. He had always been so gentle with him even when they fought. There was a care in all his touches, making sure to never cause Will any unnecessary pain. Tonight, though, Hannibal was beyond that kind of control. He didn't slam into Will but it was a near thing. His body was shaking from desperately attempting to restrain himself and failing.

Will held him close and stroked his back and rolled his hips and let him know with his body that he wanted this. Internally Will preened at the man he had turned Hannibal into in this moment. Hannibal had always made him feel wanted, but tonight he felt *needed* .

His thoughts were decimated when Hannibal started moving. Finally, for the first time in months, his mind found blissful silence. Hannibal raised up on his elbow, dug his fingers into Will's thigh, and looked right at him as he thrust into him. Will started sliding up the bed by the force and Hannibal used his hand not already occupied by a leg to hold his shoulder, keeping him firmly in place.

Will tried to contain his noises. Truly, he did. He clapped a hand over his mouth and made sounds he didn't know he could make into his palm, only to realize the slapping of skin was so stark and loud in the otherwise quiet room that anyone passing down the hall would know exactly what was happening here and for some reason he *leaked* at the thought.

Hannibal must have felt Will's pleasure on his stomach because he growled and managed to go harder somehow as he leaned down to sloppily attempt to suck marks on Will's chest, mouth constantly knocked out of place by his own movements.

They were dripping with sweat. Hannibal's fingers were slipping on his skin. Will braced a hand on the wall behind him. Then Hannibal, frustrated with his inability to mark Will successfully, bit Will hard just below his collarbone and Will was gone. His body tightened to

the point where he thought he might break something and he thrust his cock against Hannibal's stomach as much as he could, riding out the pleasure with a mind-numbing lack of inhibition. He was too lost to even notice Hannibal follow suit soon after. After he had come down from his high, he would regret the loss of the sight.

Hannibal fell on top of him and he could barely breathe, but neither of them had the presence of mind to move. Will simply lay there, gasping and open-mouthed and content to feel Hannibal envelope him both inside and out.

Eventually, Hannibal made a soft sound and pulled out. He stood on unsteady legs and Will let himself admire the miraculous view of a powerful man undone.

Hannibal grabbed the small wash basin of water, set it beside the bed, and knelt down next to it. For the next few minutes he silently devoted himself to the task of gently washing every inch of their mess from Will's body. The needy intensity of the moment had blended seamlessly into something much more intimate and Will let himself be tended to, quietly watching Hannibal with a rapture in his heart that was so strong it scared him.

The fear brought certain answers to light and he reached out to trace fingertips over Hannibal's brow. "I think I know why I was relieved."

Hannibal wiped himself off with the cloth and set it aside. He remained kneeling and looked at Will. He waited.

Will let his fingers delicately slip over the bridge of Hannibal's nose, his cheekbone, his chin. Hannibal's eyes fluttered closed briefly. Will traced the shell of his ear. "It means I have more time with you," he admitted. His fingers moved to a marking on Hannibal's shoulder. He followed the lines. "It means I have longer to know you before violence..." He shut his eyes tightly and his hand stopped. "Before violence threatens this. Threatens you. Takes you from me."

When he opened his eyes, he saw Hannibal's face etched into a picture of longing sadness.

"I didn't wish to hurt you," Will apologized weakly.

Hannibal smiled and it was the softest, most heartbreaking thing. "Oh, Will."

The afterglow of his pleasure became sharp and this time Will couldn't stop a tear from falling down his temple as his eyes stung. Hannibal wiped it away with a thumb.

"It's what you feared, isn't it?" Hannibal's query was probing but sympathetic. "To become attached and to risk the loss of that attachment. You told me as much the first time I expressed interest in you."

"The loss of that attachment," Will scoffed in a humorless laugh. "Hannibal if you were gone I would lose myself." He shut his eyes and turned his head away. He hadn't meant to make that admission. It felt more naked than his body. It was too late to take it back now, especially because it was true.

A hand gently tipped Will's face back and Hannibal waited until he opened his eyes again. With a seriousness that Will didn't often see directed at him in particular, Hannibal spoke. "I would be an unforgivable liar if I said I didn't feel the same, Will." His eyes flicked back and forth between Will's, searching for something undefined. "You have become a part of me so expediently and without reservation that sometimes I fear I have lost myself already. I would burn worlds for you."

The words spread a hot trail of fire right into Will's core. "We are dangerous for each other."

"I can't seem to care."

"Neither can I."

Hannibal licked his lips and searched Will's eyes once more for that mysterious *something* . After a moment, he rose from the floor and crawled over Will on the bed, lying down and pulling him onto his side and back against his chest. Their bared embrace made Will feel flayed open. Hannibal's breath on the back of his neck sent hot chills through his skin.

There was a hesitance in Hannibal's posture. Will could feel it in the way he twitched and breathed. "You're not saying something."

"I'm not sure now is the appropriate time."

"If not now, when?"

Hannibal sighed and gripped Will tighter. He buried his face in the back of Will's hair. "These attempts at negotiations will backfire. Tremendously."

Will sought out Hannibal's hand on his chest and laced their fingers together. "I know, but either way we're going to war. We have no control over the catalyst. So what if we just..." He rolled back just enough to peer into Hannibal's face—to catch his eyes and hold them. "What if we just accept this reprieve as it is? We know it won't last and it might end in a spectacularly awful fashion, but that's why I'm relieved. Because it could have become spectacularly awful even sooner."

Hannibal stared at him with the same wonder he always did in conversations like these. Like he could never hope to fathom the depths of Will's resolve.

Will thought that was a ridiculous sentiment, as Hannibal was the one to convince Will he had any resolve in the first place. He pressed a kiss to the older man's stubbled jaw. Hannibal grunted like the action caused him the sweetest kind of distress.

"You're right, of course."

Will blinked. "What?"

A smile. "I said you're right, Will. No use becoming trapped in the melancholy of tomorrow. We have today. I would like to have as many todays as I can with you."

“And who knows?” Will tried for a wide smile and knew it had fallen a little flat and lopsided. “Maybe we’ll both survive the war intact and can keep having our todays tomorrow.”

Hannibal rubbed a rough thumb over Will’s cheek, looking at him—cataloguing him—and pressed their foreheads together. “Yes, maybe we will.”

They fell asleep like that. Neither of them so much as shifted until morning.

For once, nothing punctured the peace they had found.

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There was a change in the city over the next few weeks. Not remarkable by any means, but noticeable. The emperor’s use in some areas was debatable at best depending on who you asked, but he performed an incredible use simply by being in Antioch.

It pacified the masses.

Over the stretch of the weeks following his arrival, the people of the city began feel some odd measure of safety for having the emperor within its walls. Or perhaps it was the hundreds of soldiers he brought in his wake, along with three additional auxilias. A grudging and tacit acceptance began to mingle in the air. Will went on walks with Bahadur and found that less people made attempts to glare holes straight through their chests. Some still did, mind, but it was lessened. For all necessary purposes, the city had calmed.

Will had resumed his training with Tadesse and while he wasn’t exactly a master swordsman now by any stretch of the imagination, he was improving bit by bit. Some of the others in the auxilia had taken to watching their sessions out in the fields like it was a sport. It made Will feel rather on display, but when no one laughed when he took a fall or missed a swing, he began to get into the showmanship of it just a bit. He would smile and occasionally offer a dramatic bow should one of his blows land. There would be whoops and cheers from their small crowd of onlookers.

Then one day legionaries joined the group, having heard about the odd immunes who was training how to fight like a Persian. Suddenly, men who weren’t even from Will’s century—and some that were—had begun requesting lessons. Seeing the opportunity for what it was, Hannibal obliged them. And now a small smattering of both groups of soldiers would train together in the afternoons.

Will would sometimes watch the other legionaries during their training and envy them in some ways. They were teaching their trainers as much as they were being taught. Will had never been adept with Roman fighting styles. He knew enough, but knowing just enough didn’t justify sharing that knowledge with others. He had killed his fair share of men on the battlefield when he absolutely had to, but he considered every one of those moments of luck and circumstance.

These men, though, were front line warriors. They knew their blades and they were able to offer up as many tactics as they took from the auxilia willing to practice with them.

Tadesse found him sitting on a crate, watching the displays of prowess in front of him. He flashed Will a dazzling grin. Will was beginning to learn this man had many different types of smiles. Some showed he was pleased, some confused, some irritated, or concerned, or friendly. He was a man of many smiles. The first person Will had ever met who could frown while smiling.

This particular smile looked like concern, so he answered before Tadesse could even ask. “I offer you so little.”

A smaller smile. The confusion one. “I do not understand.”

Will gestured out towards the men giving and taking the skills in equal measure. “You teach me so much, Tadesse. I couldn’t have asked for a better tutor and I am grateful to you.” He looked over at his companion to impress upon him the earnestness of his words. “But I offer you nothing. I can teach you nothing of battle, of my own tactics, because I have none. I feel a remarkable lack of reciprocity.”

Tadesse rubbed his chin. “Too many words, Will. Recipes?”

Will blushed. “I’m sorry. Reciprocity. It means you get what you give. If someone gives you a gift, you give them a gift back. I feel like I give you nothing.”

Tadesse’s eyes brightened in understanding. “I see. You want to give me something?”

“I suppose I do.”

“Well then?” Tadesse stared expectantly.

Will was caught short then and pinched his lips together. He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know. I don’t know what of worth I can give you.”

Rather than mock him, Tadesse seemed to consider this carefully. He made no attempts to convince Will that he owed him nothing and Will was grateful for that. Then, Tadesse seemed to have an idea. He looked positively excited and Will was rapt to find out what it could possibly be.

“Teach me medicine!”

“What?”

“You know. You do medicine. I am no healer, but I have seen many wounds. Teach me to help.”

Will was about to argue that it wasn’t so simple, but after a thought he realized it *was* that simple. Tadesse was a warrior and a traveler. Of course he would want to know how to treat minor wounds. He would never become a physician, likely had no desire to, but this? This was something Will could do. “But couldn’t you learn this from the medics of the auxilia?”

Tadesse looked at him like he was daft. “But they do not want to give me gifts.”

Will laughed. The man had a point.

And so became their new normal. Tadesse would teach Will the sword and Will would teach him of healing when the swords stopped flying for the day. Whenever Tadesse would understand a new method or remember something Will had taught him the day before, Will would savor the sense of accomplishment it instilled in him. He refused to let his mind wander to the young Augustus and his premature death. He staunchly stomped out the embers of the voice in the back of his mind, jeering at him for finding a replacement to mentor.

Stubbornly, he chose to ignore self-doubt just this once and let himself feel a modicum of fulfillment.

At night, Will would drink with his friends and enjoy their company.

After drinks, Will would enjoy a different kind of company from Hannibal.

No one had ever asked why Will no longer slept in the barracks at all.

Everyone knew what was coming. They didn't know when or how, but they knew. Whether it was a matter of days, weeks, or even months, eventually the war would come clawing at the gates like the hounds of hell and this life they had all created for themselves would come to an end.

Swordfights would cease to be practice.

So no one questioned anything of anyone. They live and let live. And Will felt the stirrings of contentment.

They had yet to hear back from the ambassadors Severus had sent to Syria. More soldiers were showing up at the outskirts of Antioch by the day. The army was becoming something torrential and incalculable. The emperor rarely showed his face and when he did it was in the company of the woman Will had seen him with before—the woman he had quickly learned to be none other than the mother of Alexander Severus herself.

No one wanted to acknowledge these things and so they didn't. Everyone clung to the moment of peace like drowning men holding onto driftwood in the middle of the sea.

One day, Will found himself wandering the market. His pocket was no heavier of coin than it usually was but he loved this place in a wistful way. The colors, the scent of spices, the ever-varying faces. He could get lost in places like this.

He saw a silk trader and paused, eyeing the bolt of rich, ruby red cloth near the edge of the table. He reached out and ran his hand over it.

"It is beautiful."

Will grimaced and retracted his hand. "It is. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

Looking up, Will took in the merchant within the stall. He was an older man with hooded eyes and many wrinkles. “I don’t have the coin for this. I shouldn’t be disturbing you.”

The merchant batted away Will’s concerns like a fly buzzing around his head. “Buy. Don’t buy. It is still beautiful.” His accent was thick, but so were many of the merchants at this side of the road.

Will tried to place the sound and failed. He felt remarkably unworldly in that moment and rubbed his neck. “I’ve heard it’s difficult to get cloth like this here, now. What with everything happening in the east.” Oh, how he wanted to jump into the river after saying such things. He thought he’d gotten better at thinking before he spoke. Clearly he was wrong.

The man took the commentary in stride. His eyes were tired but his smile unfaltering. “Very difficult, yes. Here is not the only war.”

It was strange to hear their circumstances referred to as war by anyone other than a soldier. Surprisingly, Will hadn’t heard much of that from the people of the city now that the emperor was here, not that he engaged with them much. “I’m afraid I can’t claim to be well informed.”

The merchant hummed and bobbed his head. “China is divided many, many years,” he said. “Just as I go, Sun Quan becomes emperor of Wu. Many emperors in my life. Many battles and fighting to decide such things.”

“So China isn’t united under one emperor?” Will bit his lip and shifted his posture, trying to tread carefully in the conversation. He desperately didn’t want to cause offense.

“Three!” The merchant held up the required fingers. “But is a year now. Could be four. Could be two.” He looked sad, then. “I do not hear from my family. I do not know.”

“I’m sorry.”

A shake of a head. “We are all at war. You, me, the whole world. It is life, war.”

Will frowned and ran his hand over the silk cloth again. This time he felt it catch on the callouses of his palms. “I hope that one day that isn’t true. That one day we can have peace.”

The old man seemed to have worlds of knowledge in his eyes as he looked back at Will. Or perhaps they were just the eyes of a man weary of life and the tribulations of it. “Men do not know they are alive if they are not fighting.”

Will chewed on this. He glanced down the street and saw two legionaries walking together and talking, their gladiuses swinging at their sides. He saw a guardsman with his arms crossed as he leaned back against a building and observed the crowds with a marked disinterest. He saw the traders reaching out to passersby and a nobleman shoving at his servant when he didn’t lift his load quickly enough. He looked back at the merchant. “I think men are too afraid they won’t know what to do when the fighting stops, so they keep fighting because it’s all they know. In violence is an offer of safety, in a way.”

The man smiled and reached under the table of his stall, withdrawing a small wrap of silk cloth that looked like it had been cut from a much larger bolt. It was a supple and deep blue, like that of the sea during a vicious storm. He handed it to Will. “You are smart boy. Take this, smart boy.”

Will took the cloth purely by the instinct one had to take things when handed to them. He immediately tried to hand it back. “I--I can’t pay for th--”

The merchant dismissed him again with another wave of his hand. “I said take. You take.”

Will stood there with silk cloth in his hands and a dumb look on his face. “I--thank you.”

“There always war,” the man said instead of acknowledging the gratitude. “But it is smart boys.” He pointed at Will and shook his finger. “You smart boy. You will know what we do when it is done.”

“I thought you said it was never done.”

But the man just smiled and shooed Will away from his stall.

Feeling terribly out of place carrying what was no doubt an expensive, if small clump of silk, Will felt a mounting eagerness to get off the streets. He had worked hard to become just another face in the crowd in the past few weeks. It was by luck alone that mobs had a tendency to lose their vigor quickly and forget about the legionary that had butted heads against the city itself twice already. But a poor soldier walking through the market with rich cloth was bound to draw a few eyes. Whether those eyes would take issue with him was another thing entirely, but Will didn’t feel like risking it.

He clung the fabric close to his chest like a precious prize and bowed his head to walk quickly towards the auxilia. Perhaps he could give it to Hannibal. Would Hannibal even want something such as this? The man wasn’t exactly the type who seemed to enjoy finery. He may find it impractical and gaudy. And yet...

Will thought back on the weighty feel of Hannibal’s palm on his back as he guided him into a library, expression indulgent and pleased as he encouraged Will to look his fill. He thought of being led to a small, beautiful garden to admire the flowers and the peace of seclusion. He thought of the way Hannibal read aloud in the dark of night, his words curling around prose like sliding smoke. He thought of sweet oil rubbing into bronze skin and the art inked into that skin in delicate patterns and swirls. Will frowned. The *voluntary* art, anyway.

It could be that Hannibal was precisely the type of man to appreciate finery. Simply in his own enigmatic way.

“Will!”

Will tripped over his own feet and stumbled to a stop. “Tertius! Hello.”

Tertius chuckled and placed a stabilizing hand on Will’s shoulder. “I didn’t mean to topple you with mere greetings.” He removed his hand when Will regained his footing. “Are you

well?" Before Will could formulate a response to save his dignity, Tertius noticed the cloth and lit up with intrigue. "You purchased silk? My, aren't we feeling extravagant today." He gestured to the cloth with an outstretched hand. "May I?"

Sighing, Will handed it over. "I didn't purchase it. It was gifted to me."

"Being courted by the merchants now, I see," Tertius teased, but he ran his fingers reverently over the silk as he did so. "It's a truly wonderful color, however you came by it."

"A gift, Tertius. Seemingly for good conversation."

"Now *that* I believe." Tertius grudgingly handed the cloth back to Will and grinned. "If there's one thing you've always been able to boast, it's interesting conversation."

Will's eyebrows rose. "Do you really think so?"

"Don't be daft. You can talk circles around the whole legion when you want to."

"Are you accusing me of being loquacious?"

Tertius rolled his eyes with a snort. "I'm accusing you of intelligence, Will." He glanced down at his friend's feet. "You seem to be staring at the dirt a lot lately. I hear tell that I'm not the first one to catch you unawares in recent days."

Will rubbed the back of his neck, then stopped. He really needed to rid himself of the nervous habit. "My mind is rather full."

"I fear you're not alone in that."

Will made a small sound of agreement, fingers flexing in the soft of the silk. "Part of me appreciates the reprieve of the standstill. A more restless part longs for fate to be done with it and pass judgement."

Tertius looked conflicted and shifted from one foot to another.

"What is it?" Will asked. Apprehension took an unwelcome hold to his breastbone. "I know you. You've come to tell me something, haven't you?"

Tertius let out a gust of a sigh, looking towards the eastern gates with a grimace. "I fear perhaps the restless part of you might get some answers today."

Immediately, every muscle of Will's body was stiff with nauseous anticipation. The silk no longer felt soft in his palms. Now all he felt were his callouses. "Tertius, out with it."

With a gesture for Will to follow, Tertius began to make his way down the streets and towards the gates. His posture and expression were furtive. The secrecy of it inspired Will to look around them and take in the circumstances. Many other soldiers were doing much the same, slinking through the streets with heads down and shoulders stiff.

They were trying not to raise alarms. They were trying to keep the city calm.

Will's heart kicked at his ribcage like a rabbit trying to escape a hunter. "Tertius," he whispered, trying to lean in towards his friend as they walked. "What has happened?"

Tertius glanced around to assess the likelihood of being overheard and then tilted his face towards Will. He spoke so quietly Will almost didn't hear him. "The ambassadors returned. Empty handed but not..." he trailed off and blinked so heavily that Will worried he would trip from how long his eyes remained closed. "Empty handed but not unburdened."

Will's mind raced from the implications of such words. "I don't under--"

"We've been told to retrieve anyone we can find and gather at the Eastern border of the farmlands. Quietly, if possible."

"We?"

Tertius pointedly eyed the Roman and auxilia soldiers both who were filing out of the city. "The whole legion, Will."

"The whole--" This time it was Will who cut himself off. The whole legion? A thousand men strong summoned to the city boundary. This was not a reception for the return of a failed ambassadorial mission. This was defensive. They were about to be attacked.

As soon as he realized the truth of it, he was furious. "Then why are we proceeding in such a way? We should be warning the civilians! We should be running!" He started to walk faster but Tertius grabbed his arm and held fast, slowing his pace. "Are you mad, Tertius?"

"Are *you,* Will?" Tertius looked frustrated and haggard. "Orders are to prevent panic. We don't know what's happening. Let's not sound the horns of war before we know for certain that's what it is."

Will's gladius felt heavy and irrationally hot against his thigh. The feeling tempered him. He sounded like a foolish young legionary ruled by bloodlust and rage. That wasn't the truth of him and he felt ashamed. "You're right. Forgive me, Tertius. I know you're right."

"Nothing to forgive," Tertius replied easily.

They had made it to the gates and left the inner bounds of the city within a crowd of other soldiers. Will could see a steadily forming frontline of the legion ahead just below the rise of the hills. Risking a look back, he saw a few commoners whispering amongst themselves, more curious than afraid. The city guard at the gate looked tense but impassive. They were prepared, in all likelihood, to stop any commoners who tried to follow the throng of the military.

"Is no one staying back in the city?" Will asked as the grass crunched underneath their greaves and the sounds of hundreds of other footsteps began to buzz in his ears.

"Likely a century, but that knowledge is for the officers." Tertius shrugged but it was an anxious movement.

Will noticed then that he was carrying his shield. He felt deeply frustrated at his own inattentiveness. It had been clear from the start that something was amiss, but Will had once again been too deeply lost in his own thoughts to notice.

A hand touched his elbow and he looked over. Bahadur and three other men from his auxilia were walking in step with them now, along with Lucas and Cimon.

No one said anything. They kept walking.

When they approached the mass of the army, they could hear officers shouting orders.

“Soldiers! Get in formation!” The officer screaming was red in the face from the effort of being heard over the stridency of the crowd. “Ready stance! I want silence!”

Will felt a childish urge to grab at Bahadur and keep him near as the auxilia’s men peeled off to flank formation. He clenched his fist so tight his nails dug into his palm instead. The silk cloth was still in his other hand. He could feel the sweat of his nerves soaking into it. With legs steadier than he felt, he separated from his friends to stand just back of the centurions to his right. As a combat medic he wasn’t to be on the frontline itself, but the necessity of him insisted a closer proximity to the shield bearers and pilums than he would have liked.

It was with the familiarity of the position alone that Will managed to regain a semblance of calm. He may not want a battle, but he knew his role. He knew what was required of him. The structure brought an unsteady comfort, but as he looked around him to see equally wan faces and darting eyes, he realized that the comfort was a feeble one.

Will had fought in his share of battles, yes, but never with a group larger than a single cohort. This was nine cohorts at least. This was at such a scale that his eyes failed to take it all in even as they tried.

He could smell the sweat of the men around him. He could feel the heavy heat of their breathing. Then, as formation settled and everyone began to heed the orders of silence, Will could hear the wind whistling against metal. He could feel the dirt shift as hundreds of greaves shuffled in anxious confusion. He could smell iron and sea salt.

And then he realized the ground wasn’t shaking from the restless shifting of the army around him. No, this was a rumbling sort of tremor, like the earth itself was trying to open up to them and swallow them whole. He could feel vibrations in the metal of his armor.

Then the sound reached him and his eyes shot to the hills.

What was first the echoed reverberation of a rockslide somewhere far away became the escalated roar of an entire mountain crumbling under a god’s mighty fist. It was the thunder rolling through black clouds before a wrathful storm.

They didn’t crest the hill slowly. It was as though one minute the horizon was clear and the next it was blotted out by one hundred, two hundred, three hundred distant faces. It stretched out down the slope and Will wondered how many more there were; just out of sight and lying in wait.

The sound stopped and no one seemed to breathe. Leather creaked as hands gripped weapons. The scratch of dry, dead dirt as stances barely shifted.

The Roman army of Antioch stood silently and stared at some four hundred Persians on horseback who stood over them on the hilltops like harbingers of death. Light reflected off of them oddly and Will squinted. The riders were adorned with gold. Their horses were in ostentatious dress. No swords were drawn, but regally crafted bows sat on their backs.

This wasn't an invading army. This was a show of force. This was a response to the emperor's foolhardy attempts at negotiation. This was Ardashir's answer.

A ridiculing, taunting, resounding "No."

Any army that could send such a decorated compliment as nothing more than a goading provocation had to be immense indeed. This wasn't mere rejection of diplomacy. This was Ardashir mocking the very legion itself—declaring that he saw no threat here.

Will felt the silk slip from his numb fingers as one of the horsemen rode down to meet a legatus who was confidently striding towards the force. He couldn't tell if it was Caeso from this distance; not with the helmet and full regalia and the distance. With his eyes trained on the interaction, he didn't notice the silk catch the wind and slither its way between the legs of his fellow soldiers as though it was trying to escape inevitable violence.

Try as he might, he couldn't hear the conversation that took place. The legatus turned slightly and waved at someone and Will still couldn't see his face. His eyes strained so much they hurt.

The silk caught another gust and danced among the feet of the auxilia. Will didn't witness its graceful display.

What Will *did* witness was Hannibal approaching the legatus and the Persian on horseback. His gait was calm and sure, but Will felt his heart fail to beat. He felt his stomach fill with burning acid. He could taste acrid fear on the back of his tongue. His breath gasped quietly out from between his chapped lips.

Hannibal, it seemed, had been summoned for translation. Will's entire body shook with tension as he tried to comprehend the scene. Every ounce of his focus was seeking out signs of aggression or discontent. His bones felt like the pull of a tree branch right before it snapped.

The legatus waved again and one of their own horsemen rode forth. Words were curtly exchanged and the horseman was riding at full gallop back to the city. Many soldiers turned their heads to watch the departure. Will's eyes remained trained on Hannibal.

No one moved and it felt like years were passing. Will would swear on his life that he could feel himself aging.

Eventually, the sound of returning hooves prompted him to tear his eyes away and look. The horseman had returned with other horses in his company.

The emperor.

Will's eyes widened. The emperor?

The entirety of the legion watched, engrossed, as the emperor approached the group, spoke to the legatus and then to Hannibal before turning to face the messenger. More words were spoken and emperor Severus turned and shifted in agitation. His horse stomped the dirt and Will could see a sneer of rage on his features even from this distance.

His arm cut through the air with what was likely an order and he promptly turned back towards Antioch and rode off. His guard quickly followed. Hannibal and the legatus remained.

Despite the clear animosity of the exchange, there had still been no moves towards violence. Will exchanged looks with the men around him. They looked just as lost as he.

When he looked back, he realized Hannibal was returning to the auxilia. Will made no effort to catch his gaze from within the swarm of bodies surrounding him.

"Soldiers!" And in that one shout from the legatus Will realized it truly had been Caeso this whole time. His mind felt leaden. "Detach to your cohorts and follow your centurions! Arrest these intruders and bring them to the western cliffs! There will be no battle today! Stay your blades!"

A murmur filled the space around him and Will blinked, watching the messenger return to the group on the hillside. There was no urgency in the movements—no fight. It wasn't that Will was surprised that they weren't going to fight the arrest. A few hundred men to a thousand was a fool's errand.

No, he wasn't surprised, but their acquiescence did nothing to calm him. This didn't feel like a victory. No blood had been shed and no lives had been lost, but nothing good could come from what had happened here. He knew that with every last ounce of conviction he had.

He watched blindly as his cohort separated and began up the hill, lingering back. He was not part of the arresting force. He would be of no use there. If this was not to be a battle, Will wouldn't be needed. He noticed Hannibal's auxilia and one other remained in place as well. Perhaps the officers thought it unwise to involve the auxilias that were strong in Persians.

Ignoring the other immunes that had held back, Will staggered towards the auxilia. He didn't look at their faces. He didn't want to know how this moment felt for them. No one seemed to think strangely of him as he made his way to the front of the group, straight towards Hannibal. There was little doubt that soldiers in the surrounding area would take pause at a legionary approaching the captain of an auxilia, but the men here knew who Will was. He didn't care what the others thought. They were a distant, inconsequentially nagging presence.

Hannibal saw his approach and met him. His face was grim and mouth set in a thin line. "Will." Despite the strain in his features, his voice was a whisper of relief.

At any other time, Will would have thrilled at the relief Hannibal felt at the sight of him. In this moment, however, he felt only tired. “Just tell me. Please.”

Hannibal frowned and looked at his men nearby. After a moment, it seemed he came to a decision. He turned to face the bulk of them and they were immediately at attention, hanging on his every word. Will noticed the immunes and lesser ranks from the cohorts who had remained behind and the other auxilia had gathered closer as well.

Will watched as Hannibal held captive an audience of almost two hundred men and felt in awe of him.

“You will no doubt hear of this from your commanding officers by days end.” Hannibal’s voice was loud and authoritative. It held no hesitation. He looked out at the men who were not of his auxilia as he said this and then at Will before turning back to his own men. “King Ardashir has refused diplomacy. This delegation,” he waved a hand towards the horse riders who were currently being led to the west by a solid force of the Roman legion. “Was sent to demand a withdrawal of Rome from all territories as far as the Bosporus.”

Many men muttered before Hannibal shot them a censoring glare. The silence was immediate and so Hannibal continued. “The emperor has refused these demands and ordered the arrest of the delegation.” He paused and licked his lips.

He turned to look at Will again, holding his gaze as he spoke the final words. His voice echoed strong and powerful across the field, but he spoke to Will and Will alone.

“Emperor Severus has rejected the demands and declared war.”

No one saw the fleck of blue silk carried out to the ocean on the fingers of the wind.

Chapter End Notes

And so it’s finally time! Took us almost ten years to get here, but it’s finally time for war.

Again, to anyone who has come back after so long... thank you. I cherish the love you’ve shown for this story. I will update when I can. I hope to finish this within the next couple months, but I’m old enough at this point to know life doesn’t always adhere to schedules. So I’ll do my best!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

> “I need never forgive you for anything, for I would allow you everything.”

Chapter Notes

> Another already? What can I say? I’m determined. Also... anything is better than 3 years between updates so the bar is set very low.
>
> Thank you to everyone who commented on the last chapter. I know the update came out of nowhere and I’m so happy to know so many of you still have notifications turned on for this.
>
> I hope the story as it’s playing out has been worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The news of Alexander Severus formally declaring war on King Ardashir I spread through the city of Antioch like it was Hermes himself sharing the news, but word of mouth often paved the way for grave overstatements and twistings of truth.

Will felt numbed by the gossip of the city. Citizens were openly speculating about the events that had taken place when the Persian delegation had arrived on the outskirts. Some even spoke of a battle regardless of having been near enough to hear if such circumstances had occurred. More still claimed boisterously that Severus had sentenced all four hundred riders to their deaths and tossed the bodies over the cliffs and into the sea.

He hadn’t.

After five days of remaining captive under heavy Roman guard, the unwelcome taunt of Ardashir had been sent to Phrygia to cultivate land as slaves.

The tongues of the legion were only moderately more tempered than the civilians thanks solely to the work of a great many officers attempting to keep them informed and distracted by equal measure.

But the information did nothing to calm the raging fires of a war declared in the hearts of the soldiers. Information did nothing to soften the disgust at allowing the horsemen of the Persian army to go unpunished for their offense.

Will had tried to argue once, and only once, that slavery was a punishment in itself. He'd received a black eye in response from the legionary he said it to.

He didn't make the argument again.

Even with the declaration, the war efforts escalated in slow and stalling steps. Many men attributed this hesitation to the emperor himself and it was a fair assumption. There was no question that Severus was not a military-minded man and a declaration of war had done nothing to change this simple truth.

The army at Antioch grew and reports from the border of Mesopotamia increased. Training intensified until brows were constantly caked in dirt and sweat and the tension of commanding officers drilled a constant vigilance into the men. Talk of marches and retaliation became a constant topic around every table.

Yet no solid plans were set forth. There were rumors of a campaign into Syria, but Will was so inundated by gossip and orders both that he could no longer discern truth from fiction any longer, so he settled on determining validity by whomever spoke the words. If he didn't hear it from Caeso, Hannibal, Bahadur, or Valerian, he decided it was false until proven otherwise. It was simpler to live that way. It eased some of his mental burdens.

Weeks passed in this hazy, ambiguous state. Those weeks turned to months.

Soon, the new normal of the soldiers of the legion had cemented itself into their lives. They would train, they would drink and share tales plucked from the grapevine, they would sleep, and their days would begin again. Each week their numbers grew and each week their discontent would grow along with them.

s

A group of them were gathered at the tavern, chairs pulled up to the table as they huddled over it in an exhausted heap of limbs. Will, Lucas, Cimon, Jove, Bahadur, and an Iberian auxilia soldier by the name of Sinebetin who had taken to joining them on occasion. Tertius and Valerian were off tending to their respective duties and Hannibal and Caeso were called away to another one of their extensive and seemingly pointless war gatherings that never seemed to determine anything at all.

The men sighed, having learned long ago that Lucas was past the point of being silenced in his grumblings. There was little need for censure anymore in either case. His sentiment was echoed loudly no matter which direction one turned.

It was truly astonishing more men had no been punished for being so vocal in their condemnations, but Will supposed the sheer mass of it held the officers back. Such circumstances had to be dealt with by more careful hands than his.

He tried not to think about words like mutiny and desertion because it seemed like only a matter of time now and there was no purpose in wringing his hands over it.

"I find myself less eager for death, old friend." Cimon's words were too dull to be pointed.

Lucas grimaced. “I’d rather die than continue dithering.” Jove laid a hand on his arm and gave him a weary look. Lucas shrunk further into his wine with his jaw clenched.

“Terrible answers are better than no answers at all,” Bahadur agreed quietly.

Will shot him a surprised glance. “I’d have thought--”

“I don’t wish for war,” Bahadur cut Will off before he could voice his presumptions. “But I cannot condemn Lucas for his desire to *know* .”

Will sighed. “Yes. The feeling isn’t exactly uncommon these days.”

“And you don’t share it?” Lucas demanded, settling a hard stare on Will. His nerves were clearly frayed.

“You know I do,” Will said patiently. “I’ve said as much, Lucas. I simply understand that neither option is ideal. Whether we continue to stand idly by or we march into battle, the circumstances beget one kind of misery or another.”

Lucas looked chastened and finished off his wine. “I’m sorry. I...” He rubbed a large hand over his face and Will couldn’t remember ever seeing him look so downtrodden. “I’m sorry.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Sinebetin tapped his fingers on the table and looked around the tavern. He was a contemplative man who didn’t seem to suit the life of a soldier but took to it with the stoicism of someone will little choice and no desire to fight fate. “What say you of the murmurings of a plan to cross the Euphrates?” His question was asked of anyone at the table.

It was Jove who answered. “I’ve asked Valerian. He states it is one possibility of many.”

Sinebetin raised a thick brow. “So it is possible.”

“It is possible.”

Lucas growled and smacked his cup against the table. “More uncertainty. It’s endless.”

“You expected swift action?” Jove inquired carefully. His eyes were amused but his tone was prudent. They all heard the slight to Severus in the implication even if it wasn't voiced.

The loudest secret in the entire legion. Alexander Severus: The emperor of cowardice.

“Perhaps I had hoped the generals would speak some sense.” Lucas shoved his cup away and didn’t bother summoning for more.

Bahadur ran his fingers along the grain of wood on the tabletop. “Along the borders, certainly. There is little doubt that the legions to the east are taking their own commands to some extent, but here?” He lifted his hand and gestured vaguely around his head. “Here the generals must wait to act.”

“One could argue generals who aren’t waiting are just as dangerous,” Will muttered. He plucked at the bindings of his lorica segmentata. He wondered why they were still required to wear armor when within the city limits. It was all posturing and no utility. Decimus had argued it was to strengthen their backs and harden their bones. Will thought Decimus was full of shit. He sighed softly and returned to the conversation at hand. “The generals here would dare make no moves without the explicit orders of the emperor. The generals outside the reach of Antioch are at too great a distance for such concerns—too close to the enemy—and are likely taking whatever actions suit their circumstances best in the moment. There’s no telling which is worse. Waiting for direction for too long or making the choice yourself and sacrificing a unified front.”

The words left the table deep in thought for many long moments.

The night carried on much like this until the moon was high in the sky and bathing the city in blue and white. The men went their separate ways, dour and defeated, and no one questioned Will as he set back with Bahadur and Sinebetin to the auxilia appointments.

Sinebetin bid them goodnight and Bahadur clapped Will on the shoulder in a friendly gesture as they found their way back and then Will was alone.

Hannibal wasn’t in his quarters and so Will removed his armor with tired and unhurried motions. He washed himself in the basin and removed his tunic as an afterthought, sliding into the bed and propping his head on his arms to stare at the pale ceiling. The weather had grown hot and oppressive and he felt a bead of sweat trickle over his bare collarbones and down his chest.

He breathed deeply of the humid air and closed his eyes.

He was startled awake as the bed shifted and he looked over to see Hannibal, already disrobed and lit only by the moonlight from the window. It appeared he had blown out the candles. The faintest scent of smoke was already dissipating.

Will yawned and reached a hand out to Hannibal’s as the other man lay down next to him. “Did I fall asleep?”

Hannibal lightly gripped Will’s fingers. “So it would seem.” He ran his thumb over Will’s knuckles. “I didn’t intend to wake you.”

“No.” Will rolled onto his side to face Hannibal and rubbed at his eyes. “No, I’m glad you did. I’ve hardly seen you in three days despite sharing a bed every night.”

Hannibal smiled. “I’ve missed you as well.”

Will was grateful the darkness covered the blush rising on his cheeks. He laid a hand on Hannibal’s chest and idly stroked the hair there. Sometimes, when it was truly late and he was tired, he enjoyed these moments between them the most. Sometimes, when the day had been grueling and he was despondent, he realized that these would be the moments he missed.

“Did your meetings provide any insight?”

Hannibal’s smile fell and he turned to face the ceiling. He gripped Will’s hand on his chest to show the frustration wasn’t his doing. “Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“That does seem the constant way of things now.”

After opening his mouth to reply, Hannibal visibly swallowed his words and paused to think. “It’s not that there is no plan. The issue resides in the debate over *when* to move forward, not in the direction we will move forward to.”

Stunned, Will leaned up on his elbow to stare directly into Hannibal’s face. “You’ve not said this before. Why have you not said this before?”

Hannibal lifted a hand and caressed Will’s cheek. He looked unreasonably fond in contrast to Will’s clear irritation. “Because I did not wish to concern you with uncertainties. It was only today that we received confirmation that tentative plans have become a question of when, rather than if.”

Will immediately deflated and felt sheepish. “Forgive me. I shouldn’t have assumed. Even if you were keeping things from me, it is your right.”

Hannibal shook his head. “I need never forgive you for anything, for I would allow you everything.”

Will huffed as he was pulled down for a soft, lingering kiss. “Only a fool makes such declarations,” he whispered against Hannibal’s lips.

“Then I suppose I am a fool.”

Will huffed and fell back to the bed. “Was Caeso with you in the meetings?”

A look passed Hannibal’s face. “You haven’t spoken to him?” His nose twitched and he looked as though he were chiding himself. “Of course you haven’t. You were asleep when I returned.” He shut his eyes and it was then that Will knew there was unpleasant news.

“Please, just tell me. I’ve no stomach for suspense anymore.”

Hannibal grimaced, apologetic. “It’s likely not my place to be the bearer of this news.” He stroked the back of his finger against Will’s lips. “But I can deny you nothing.”

Will waited, heart in his throat.

After a torturous pause of deliberation, Hannibal found his words. “I know that you were made aware of this possibility some time ago. Severus sent the command of his company to lead the cohort coming up from the south. He has appointed Caeso in his place.” He glanced at Will to gauge his reaction, but Will’s expression was shuttered. “Decimus has been given command of your century. Caeso is to lead the legion at large at the behest of the emperor when we march.”

Will digested the news in pieces. Each syllable set a new lump in the pit of his stomach like leaden weights. His eyes fell shut at the heft of it and he turned his head until half his face was buried in the pillow beneath it. He felt Hannibal's hand on the side of his head like a distant and nebulous thing.

"Will?"

Swallowing with great difficulty, Will shook his head, grateful when Hannibal didn't allow the movement to dislodge the comfort of his palm.

"Will. Speak to me."

"Command of the legion? He will be at the front of the charge, then. A bright, gleaming target at the head of a thousand men."

"Yes." Hannibal made no attempts at dismissing the severity of it.

"He is my brother in all but blood."

"I know."

Will couldn't stop the tears that burned his eyelids and felt sticky on his face. "And you're telling me he's been condemned to die first and to wear it as a badge of honor."

"Will." Hannibal pushed away the tears with his thumbs, rolling fully on his side to pull their faces closer together. "This is not a death sentence."

Will tried to meet the other man's eyes, but he couldn't see through the swimming clouds of his misery. He felt more tears spill over—hot, unrelenting stabs of a loss yet to be experienced. "It cannot be anything other than a death sentence, Hannibal."

Rather than try to comfort him with platitudes, Hannibal merely tugged until their foreheads pressed together and they breathed each other's air.

"What if you and your men aren't assigned to my century?" Will hated how his voice choked as he spoke. "You're under Caeso's command. What if I march into war without you?"

Hannibal made a pained sound and tried to press closer. Their shared breaths were thick and stifling.

Will wished desperately that Hannibal had something to say; some kind of reassurance that none of these fears would come to pass. For an instant, he resented that the man who held him wasn't truly stronger than he was. It was unthinkable that Hannibal could be human too. It was unforgiveable that he was just as lost as Will.

He felt a foreign rage thrashing within the confines of his belly and he gripped Hannibal's arm tightly in a clawed fist, digging his nails into skin.

Hannibal was supposed to be impenetrable. He was meant to be the one that carried them through this. He was not allowed to be mortal and afraid and uncertain. Will couldn't bear it

if Hannibal was anything other than untouchable and implacable. If he was but a *man* then the world could steal him away and Will couldn't process the concept of such an unthinkable betrayal.

He knew his thoughts to be irrational but the power of their ferocity was staggering.

"The scholar who taught me your language spoke often of the province of Achaia, of Athens," Hannibal said. His voice was somber and benign and it shocked Will from his stupor by unexpectedness alone. "It is a free city. A hub of intellectual curiosity and education free of the legion. He told me I should go there when I was older and wiser. When the fire of battle had faded from my heart."

Will's fingers relaxed in Hannibal's arm. He delicately traced the marks he'd left behind in silent apology.

Hannibal brushed Will's hair out of his face and continued. "I spoke with his apprentice at length about it. We agreed to visit it together. A poor Roman and a wayward Persian to walk the senatorial halls with our heads held high and noses in the air." He broke off until a chuckle. "Where his master was a soothing balm for a rash temper, he was a boisterous kind of spirit. I could see the wanderlust in his eyes. We found a kinship in that."

"You've said so little about them." Will found his voice barely escaped him as though sound itself was loathe to break this moment of discovery about Hannibal's past.

"I am ashamed that I have not," Hannibal admitted. "Those two men saved my life. The scholar with the wisdom to calm me and his charge with the spirit to inspire me. They saw in me a man adrift and gifted me back a purpose, but I failed them in the end."

"You couldn't have--" Will halted and decided against convincing Hannibal the scholar's death wasn't his fault. Such old wounds were long since healed into scars that could not be so easily removed. "You told me his apprentice may have escaped," he settled for instead.

Hannibal pursed his lips and shrugged. "It's a story I like to tell myself. Darius used to speak to me of a woman who held his heart. I asked him many times why he didn't go to her, but he said he didn't feel worthy of her or their child. That he sought to gain the knowledge of the world and bring it back to them so he could elevate their family. I always thought it foolish, but I imagine to myself that he made his way back to them. It's better than the alternative."

Will's mouth had gone dry. He reeled back and sat up in the bed. It couldn't be. The impossibility of it--

"Will?" Hannibal rose cautiously, hand outstretched.

"Darius?"

Hannibal's eyes narrowed and his hand fell. He searched Will's face. "I... yes. I'll always remember his name because the name comes Darius from Persia. I felt it to be some kind of sign, as naive as it seems. But yes. Darius Benedictus. Why?"

“Bene--” Will was on his feet with such haste that his legs caught in the blankets and he almost tumbled to the floor. He was dizzy. “Benedictus!” He waved his arms in front of him and knew he must look like a frightfully mad thing. “Benedictus?” Wild eyes sought out Hannibal’s confused ones for confirmation and he received a nod. “Benedictus, gods. I can’t believe it.”

“The more you say it, the more perplexed I become.” Hannibal was sitting on the edge of the bed now, observing Will’s mania with parted lips.

“I’m sorry.” Will ran his fingers through his hair and then pulled at it, trying to regain his composure. “But, Hannibal, you don’t understand.”

“I’ll have to agree with you.”

Reason wormed its way through the shock and Will forced himself to still. He fell to his knees and took Hannibal’s hands in his own. “Have I truly never told you? Have I never had reason to tell you my name?”

Hannibal looked affronted for a moment. “I know your--” He stopped short. “Your name.” Comprehension began to take hold.

Will looked up at him imploringly. He begged him to understand.

Hannibal looked as though he’d be stunned to stone. “Willhelm Benedictus.”

“Yes.”

“He never told me his child’s name. I never asked.”

Their hands were holding so tightly it surely hurt them both, but neither let go.

“My father came home to us when I was but a boy.” Will spoke with a reverence owed to secrets the air wasn’t ready to carry. “Not six. My mother was lost to us shortly after his return. I remember very little, but what I do know is that he was a man of books and knowledge and travel. He told such tales but never spoke to me of his past. Not in specifics. I sensed that it pained him. When he died I resigned myself to never know his history.”

Hannibal looked at Will with unabashed wonder. “We cannot be certain this is the same man. We cannot.” But it was clear he didn’t believe his own words.

“A Darius Benedictus who had the spirit of a scholar and left a wife and child to become worldly? You know as well as I do it cannot possibly be any other.” Will was shaking. “It was my father, Hannibal. Gods, you *knew* my father!”

Hannibal ran his palms over Will’s face. He traced his brow, his nose, his lips, his jaw. He looked at him as though he was seeing him for the first time. “What designs have destiny to bring me to love the son of the man who saved my spirit? Had it not been for him I never would have met you.”

Will laughed and leaned bodily into Hannibal's knees. "Had it not been for him I would not exist entirely."

"To think I knew of you twenty years before I ever saw you."

The thought of whether or not Will should be conflicted by the difference in their age flitted over his mind quickly before he dismissed it without hesitance. "I wish you had been able to say goodbye to him."

"As do I." Hannibal soothed Will's hair back from the disarray of excitement. "But to know that he escaped to raise you—that because of that I was able to find you—I cannot find it in myself to regret it as much as I could."

"To think that in the entire empire of Rome that you should find my family twice," Will mused, eyes drooping as Hannibal continue to smooth his hair. "It feels horribly irresponsible to declare it fate."

"And yet it feels like fate, all the same."

Will took a deep breath and shut his eyes. "It does." He felt awed by the realization. His father had gifted him many things in his life. Knowledge, humility, acceptance. But never in a thousand years would Will have expected that his father's final parting gift had been this.

He had gifted him someone to cherish.

It was the finest gift he had ever received.

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They filled the free moments of their days with stories.

Hannibal would regale Will with tales of his father's adventurous exploits in Byzantium and Will would share memories of the tempered and kindly man who had survived such a youth to impart wisdom on his young son; the son that would one day find Hannibal in this tumultuous time.

The revelation had solidified the thread between them as though it had been cast in iron. They had always been drawn to one another, but the confirmation of a past connected by nothing more than the whimsical impulse of fate had made everything seem preordained in an undeniable way.

Will had constantly questioned his urge to know Hannibal so utterly and completely. He had always felt like the mutual compulsion that held them together was inscrutable in a way that demanded a justification that couldn't be found.

It may very well have been that the discovery that Hannibal had known his father was nothing more than an excuse for him to no longer seek explanations for his feelings, but to him it was equally as likely that this was the world telling him that this was meant to be his. Hannibal was his by right. And he was Hannibal's.

They never expressed these thoughts aloud, but Will could see it in the way Hannibal looked at him. There was a contentment there that hadn't been there before. A relief of sorts.

The quiet and shared belief that something larger than themselves had intended their companionship felt like a shield against whatever future awaited them.

Neither saw fit to doubt it. They needed the hope as surely as they needed each other.

But such hope, while a powerful cleansing of the spirit, did nothing to ease the aches of the body.

Decimus took his new charge of the century with a level of ardency that nearly tore the men limb from limb each time they trained. Training days were increased by staggering hours. They were forced to begin distance training with their packs of individual rations strapped to them along with full regalia. They would be sent on day-long treks into the shrublands while bearing heavy loads, set up camp, and tear everything down to return the next day. Those legionaries who had been training with the auxilia began to stop coming one by one, too beaten and shaky to hold a sword by the end of the day.

Will found his workload doubled. He and Orion had been ordered to run training drills for all the young medicus for the entire legion. What few moments Will had where he wasn't struggling on trembling legs alongside other legionaries during combat and distance inculcation were spent whittling away at the knowledge of their immunes. His throat always felt dry from carrying on lengthy explanations and answering endless questions.

The days ended with Will's legs wobbling, his fingers numb, and his voice hoarse from overuse.

The only usefulness he found in the constant strain was that he had little time for worrying. He hadn't been able to speak to Caeso since his promotion, but he was uncertain if it was due to the both of them having so little time to themselves or if Caeso was avoiding him. The nights found him too depleted to spend any length of time thinking about it.

"Decimus will kill us before the battles begin," Will groaned one night as he voiced his complaints to Hannibal. He was collapsed on the bed in an ungainly mass of fatigued limbs and Hannibal was sitting next to him with a tolerant smile on his face.

"I don't believe that's his intention."

Will scoffed. "It's power lust."

"He's preparing the men for what is doubtless to be the most grueling campaign most have ever attempted."

Will glanced up at the other man to gauge whether or not he was disappointed in his whining. He found only patience in the gaze that met his. "It will be no campaign at all if none of us can walk to make it."

Hannibal nodded, acceding. "You've more demands made of you than most."

Will groaned and pressed his hands to his eyes. “If I have to judge the wrapping of one more bandage I shall set all the medical stores aflame and be done with it.”

“I fear that may not be the most helpful solution.” Hannibal’s voice was full of humor.

“Helpful to *me* .” Will snorted and lightly smacked Hannibal’s thigh with his knuckles to acknowledge that he knew how childish he was behaving. “I know why Decimus is running us ragged. I truly do, but I also believe giving the men a moment to breathe would be wise. I know I’m no officer and such calls aren’t mine to make. I’m not intending arrogance.”

“I hear no arrogance,” Hannibal replied. He ran a hand through Will’s hair and scratched at his scalp. “I agree with you. The men must be hardened, yes, but Decimus would do to remember that they are still men. Give it time, Will. He may take longer than you wish to recognize it, but I believe he will see the need for rest in time.”

Will started to respond only to get interrupted by a soft but insistent knock on the door. Hannibal’s hand froze in his hair.

“Who calls?” Hannibal asked loudly. His voice bounced off the walls and it made Will wince.

“Valerian,” came the answer.

Will blinked and the two of them exchanged a curious and perplexed look. They were laying quite intimately, but they were fully clothed and the visitor was Valerian, of all people. If they could trust anyone into this small sanctuary of theirs, Valerian would be one of the few. Will held his hands up in a gesture of indecision and allowed Hannibal to make the choice.

Hannibal gave Will’s hair one last stroke and returned his arm to his own side. He made no other moves to adjust their circumstances, however, and called out that Valerian could enter.

The door opened and Valerian caught sight of the two of them reclining in bed and looking so at ease with one another. He smiled and shut the door behind him, an action for which Will was terribly grateful. Valerian hovered for a moment, unsure of how much of the space he could breach, before he visibly forced himself to relax and leaned a toned shoulder against the wall.

“Will. Hannibal.” He nodded to each of them.

Will pulled himself up so he could be seated with his back against the wall. He felt less exposed than he thought he might, which spoke to the great depths of his trust in the man before them. “I confess this is unexpected. You’re the first one to visit here, or, well--” Will glanced around, chuckling awkwardly. “Here as in this room, at any rate.”

Valerian gave a half shrug and smiled again, tight but genuine. “I would have waited, but I might not be able to find you easily come morning.”

“Waited?” Will frowned.

Hannibal folded his hands in his lap. “You have news, then.”

A nod. “I do. I hope I’ve caused no discomfort in bringing it to you in this way.”

“You are most welcome here.”

Valerian’s smile was slightly less tense that time around. “Thank you, Hannibal.”

The conversation stagnated and Will let the standstill linger for only a breath before he pushed it along. “You have news?”

“Ah, right.” Valerian straightened up and then seemed to realize there was no need to stand at attention in this place so he leaned back against the wall once more. “Best just to be out with it, then. The emperor will be addressing the legion tomorrow in the early hours.”

“He what?” Will gaped. Alexander Severus hadn’t once spoken to the legion in its entirety. This could only mean—

“I know not the contents,” Valerian started before Will’s thoughts could truly run rampant. “But what I do know is that Laurentinus just revealed to myself and the other officers that Severus intends to begin the march in short order.”

Hannibal stiffened. “This was not said in the last council. What precipitated this?”

Valerian grunted helplessly. “I haven’t the faintest clue. It’s as sudden to my ears as yours.”

Will startled when Hannibal lurched off the bed and began to pace, his strides rigid and agitated. “Hannibal?”

“Folly!” Hannibal spat seemingly to no one. He was more irate than Will had ever seen him. In fact, Will couldn’t remember ever seeing Hannibal in a state that could even compare. “Does he not think to inform his officers of this decision prior to some grand speech?”

Valerian and Will looked at each other, uncertain.

“Hannibal,” Will tried again. He sat up and began to move off the bed when Hannibal aborted his pacing and sighed heavily, running his fingers through his hair and staring resolutely at the wall.

“I understand,” Valerian said quietly. “You feel disrespected.”

Hannibal said nothing and closed his eyes. Every muscle in his body seemed quivering and contained like the moments before a battle.

“I assure you it’s a feeling we all share.” Valerian’s jaw muscles ticked as he clenched it. “We feel as an afterthought.”

Will sagged where he sat. He felt exceptionally useless.

After another deep and haggard breath, Hannibal spoke. “It reeks of impetuousness and little consideration.”

The tension in the air roiled like thick waves of oil.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence where Will watched as the strain leaked out of Hannibal's posture in intentional and incremental hitches. When he finally seemed to regain some control of himself, Hannibal turned around to face them. "I apologize. That was unbecoming."

Valerian and Will both shook their heads, but Valerian won the race to a response. "My reaction was much like yours when I heard." His countenance hardened into something thoroughly foreboding and he refocused his attention on his compatriot. "Will, please understand. While I doubt you'll even have opportunity to do so before the time comes, you mustn't reveal this to any of the lower ranks. Even after the announcement." He chewed his lip. "If they were to discover the officer's had no knowledge of this decision, their anger would surely be something we cannot stem."

Will tried to swallow, but his throat felt rough and stuck. "I--" His voice broke and he coughed before attempting again. "Of course, Valerian. I'm well aware of the concerns." His mind had been echoing fears of mutiny since his first meeting with Laurentinus all those months ago.

"Yes, I suppose you are."

Hannibal frowned and sat back down. His fingers gripping the bedcovers tightly until his knuckles were white and the fabric creaked faintly were the only indications that he was still at odds. "They will find out in time."

Valerian looked defeated at the suggestion. "Yes, I suppose that too."

"Let us hope we are long into marches before that happens."

"When they are too tired to object."

Will grimaced. "Or perhaps they will be so emboldened by the fury of exhaustion." He nearly flinched when both sets of eyes turned to him, but he managed to hold himself steady. "As medicus I am all too aware of man's reaction to a suffering of the body. There will be rage. Let us not fool ourselves into believing otherwise."

The other men looked displeased by the sentiment but not in opposition.

"There's nothing more we can do," Valerian muttered finally. "We'll face these obstacles as they present."

Hannibal and Will both nodded quietly.

Valerian cleared his throat and stood straight. "I am truly sorry to be the one to dull your night."

"I prefer to have heard it from you," was Will's earnest reply.

A smile and Valerian moved towards the door. “I’ll leave you. Be aware that a messenger will bring news in the morning of the event. The auxilia is expected to be in attendance.”

Hannibal made a soft sound of assent. “They will be.”

“Good. Then goodnight.” And Valerian was gone.

Time ticked by in pieces after that. The two of them went about their nightly rituals in complete silence, washing up and snuffing out candles before settling into the bed. They lay on their backs, forearms pressed together but minds separate as they parsed through their own ruminations.

When it had gone on so long that Will wasn’t even sure that Hannibal was awake any longer, he finally whispered into the dark of the room. “You said Decimus would give us rest in due time.”

“I did.” Awake, then.

There was a long interlude where both of them continued to stare at the ceiling.

Will shut his eyes tightly and his chest ached. “I think perhaps we won’t have that time.”

“No.”

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The morning had the gall to find itself both hot and chilled as if it couldn’t decide its mood any better than the people left to endure it.

The century and its auxilias had all been summoned outside the internal walls of the city. They drowned out the green grass of the fields with their bodies. A thousand men crowded together and as quiet as the dead.

A cold breeze flicked Will’s hair against his forehead. His palms were sweating. He felt Tertius shift on his feet beside him and press their shoulders together. Cimon was a hulking, steady presence behind them. Any other familiar faces were melted into the sea of leather and bronze and iron.

The silence felt cacophonous. It was a physical pressure that was bodily shoving their greaves into the dirt with the weight of it.

Will had expected the crowd to be full of murmurs and speculation. He should have known the men were too attuned to the winds of war for that. They knew what this was. There was no mistaking the intention here; not when Severus had made such admirable attempts to remain invisible since his arrival.

Will narrowed his eyes and peered at the front of the gathering.

Emperor Alexander Severus was at the head of it all astride a beautifully groomed stallion. His generals formed a line just behind him a bore the display with resolute stoicism.

Severus looked for all the world like a child playing war and Will felt his lips curl in involuntary disgust. Tertius' shoulder became a firmer weight against his own and he schooled his features.

Looking every bit the legatus augusti pro praetore, Laurentinus stabbed the butt of his pilum into the dirt and looked over the field. He was in full armor. "Legion of Rome!" he bellowed. A thousand backs stiffened in unison. "Hear your emperor now!"

Even the birds and the wind and the ocean had fallen silent. Nature had lost her voice.

Severus shifted on his horse, turned this way and that, and he let loose his words. "I'd like, oh comrades, to give you a customary speech!" Some men twitched at the invocation of comradery, but the silence reigned supreme. "The speech from which I, speaking to you my legion, may receive approval and you, when you hear it, receive encouragement."

Severus' horse stomped a hoof into the dirt and he paused for a moment before continuing. "Since you have enjoyed a period of relative peace for many years, you may be surprised to hear something unusual or contrary to your imaginations. Brave and intelligent men should pray for things to go well, but they also have to endure whatever happens."

Many of the men began to grow restless at the words. The mere implication that they were wholly unaware of their situation was grievously offensive, but silencing looks from surrounding officers held them in place.

Severus seemed to take no notice of the discontent. "It is true that enjoyment of things done for pleasure brings gratification, but good results come mainly from arranging things properly when necessity demands it. Initiating unjust actions is not evidence of good intentions, but it is a courageous act to free ourselves from those who generate dangers when this is done with a good conscience; good results can be expected if one does nothing unjust but attempts to avoid injustice."

Will's teeth were grinding and his calves ached with tension. He could hardly bear to hear Severus excuse his foolhardy attempts at diplomacy as an avoidance of injustice. He had no need to look around him to know the sentiment was shared.

The emperor raised his hand as though summoning the attention of the soldiers with a beckoning. "The Persian Ardashir has killed his king, Artabanus, and the Parthian Empire turned Persian. He, despising our work and Roman reputation, is trying to assault and destroy our imperial possessions." His hand clenched into a fist. "I have tried to persuade him by letter to control his greed and his mad desire to occupy other people's property, but the king, with the arrogance characteristic of barbarians, does not want to stay within his borders and challenges us to battle. We do not hesitate, therefore, to accept his challenge!"

There were choked coughs rattling in the air. Whether they were of outrage, indignation, or mockery, Will couldn't be certain. Even the officers made no silencing actions.

We do not hesitate?

Will was numbly dumbfounded.

Severus, so lost in his own feelings of righteous inspiration, carried on. “You veterans will remember the victories against the barbarians under the leadership of Septimius Severus and my father, Caracalla. You recruits, yearning for glory and honor, make it clear that you know how to live in peace with propriety, but make it equally clear that courage is needed for war when necessity demands it.” He shifted on his horse again, looking into the faces of the soldiers.

Will wondered if anyone truly met his eyes or if he was summarily rejected.

“The barbarian is bold against those who hesitate or are cowardly but he does not hold his own against those who fight! It is not in close combat that they can prevail against us. On the contrary, they believe that any success that leads to victory is the result of looting, after a feigned retreat or escape.”

What Will knew of Persians made the words hollow. Doubt was an insidious vine clinging inside his skull. To proclaim the Persians an inferior combat force was foolhardy at best and downright disastrous at worst.

“Discipline, organization, and battle tactics are in our favor. Together with the fact that we have always beaten the barbarians. As such, we march on Syria in six days hence! We shall cross the Euphrates and Tigris and demand the withdrawal of such barbaric men who have seen fit to forget the might of the Roman Empire!”

The speech continued for some time after that, filled with rallying cries and empty encouragement. The younger of the legion cheered and roared when it was appropriate for them to do so and Severus seemed invigorated by the wordless praise. If he noticed the veterans and their silence, he made no show of it. Perhaps he considered them reticent by means of wisdom.

Will stared with blind eyes at the man in front of him.

Six days.

He felt someone grab his wrist and lead him away as the army began to return to the city. The rough tug of it and thick callouses told him it was likely Lucas who had managed to find him. He didn’t look up to check. He just allowed himself to be led.

Six days.

He ignored the stares of citizens as they passed by them in the streets. He didn’t know if there were whispers. His blood was loud in his ears. He could hear his own unsteady heartbeat. The hand that he thought might be Lucas continued to propel him forward, holding him firm when he stumbled. Then there was a warm palm on the back of his neck and he sighed. Hannibal.

Lucas, surprisingly, didn’t release him even as Hannibal appeared and Will let himself be guided by the two sure presences on either side of him.

They only had six days.

Someone pushed him into a chair and he blinked, wondering when they had gotten inside of a building. A quick look around told him they had returned to the auxilia appointments and with no small amount of wonder did he realize that a large handful of legion soldiers had crammed into the space with them alongside auxilia soldiers. Small, tenuous conversations were being had. Men with more alertness to their eyes began fetching wineskins and bread and doling them out to the beleaguered troops.

Bahadur appeared before Will and dragged a chair so near to his that when he sat in it they were pressed together in a line from thigh to shoulder. Will, so stumped by this deliberate affection, wondered if perhaps he appeared outwardly as unstable as he felt internally—that so many of his friends felt a need to moor him to the earth with their bodies. He felt the urge to object to this coddling even as he shivered with gratefulness.

Bahadur pretended not to notice. Will pretended not to notice Hannibal looking at the pair of them with unrestrained warmth.

Someone handed Will a cup of wine and he took it between damp and shaky fingers. He drained half of it at once and then settled it in his lap for fear of dropping it.

“Six days,” he said. The thought had been pounding against his teeth trying to escape since the moment it had been announced.

Bahadur let his head rest back against the wall. His body was still pressed to Will’s side and he sighed. “We knew it was coming.”

Will’s fingers clenched and unclenched against his cup. “But six days.”

Tertius approached and collapsed to the floor on Will’s right. Will truly believed then that he must look like he was about to faint or something equally dramatic. Tertius looked up at him and pulled a grin onto his face from somewhere within him that eluded Will with tenacity. “It will feel like less than six days.”

Will kicked Tertius’ leg with no real intent. “That’s not helping.”

“I was supposed to be helping?”

Will laughed in spite of himself.

They all froze when Caeso entered the room.

Caeso, whose steps had been sure and confident up until the moment he entered, faltered briefly when his eyes met Will’s. The Roman soldiers in the confines of the building seemed unsure how to react with their former legatus in such closed quarters, but when Caeso made no moves to command their attention they relaxed and returned to their conversations.

Caeso rubbed at his red hair, pressed his thumb between his eyebrows, shook his head, and grabbed a chair to sit in front of Will and the others. Hannibal joined him only seconds later and they found themselves in some sort of misshapen circle.

Will was fascinated to see Caeso and Hannibal sitting so closely and comfortably. The two strongest men he knew, and there they were both looking weary and resigned and yet admirably at peace with the circumstances in a way that only leaders could truly manage.

“Will.” Caeso had a thousand apologies in his eyes and Will decided immediately that regardless of the reasons for their prolonged separation, he would forgive him utterly.

Will let a small smile pull at his lips. “It’s about time you showed yourself.”

Caeso snorted in disbelief and then laughed, loud and hearty. The sound was barked into the room like a clap of thunder and it preceded the most consuming silence of the day.

Then, as though a singular, truthful sound of joy was all that was needed to sever the ropes that bound them all with dread, the room was suddenly uproariously loud with dialogue. The men were laughing and ranting and settling more heavily into their chairs. All from a single laugh.

Relief bled into Will’s bones.

“I’m sorry,” Caeso said. The lines by his eyes were still smiling. “To more than just you, Will. I confess that circumstances made me doubt my welcome, as foolish as that may sound.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Family needs no welcome.” He pursed his lips and looked away in embarrassment as he was met by a look that could only be called a genuine and simple *love* .

“I have missed you, Will.”

“Yes, well.” Will shifted in his seat and found himself leaning against Bahadur who had become something of a cliff face to shield him from the storm. “It seems it would behoove you not to wander off again, then. You’re not pardoned to forget us simply because you’re getting important.”

This time it was Tertius who let out a laugh that sounded more like a yelp. When Will glanced at him he was very conspicuously staring at the floor.

Caeso groaned and turned to Hannibal. “Knowing you has made him a terrible menace.”

Hannibal looked entirely too amused. “I’m afraid he was a menace long before I met him.”

Will gaped. He was spared concocting a retort when the others found them. The scraping of stools and shuffling of positions had Will surrounded for the first time in months by everyone he loved. He felt both steeled and terrified by it.

He looked around at the faces he knew so well.

Bahadur, who had become a most unlikely and steadfast friend with advice that steered Will away from his consuming thoughts. Who never turned him away and never looked upon him with judgement.

Jove, who had always been the one to ensure Will took care of himself when he had all but forgotten to do so—trading sentry duties when Will needed sleep and always seeming to have spare fruit in his bag for Will and Will alone.

Valerian, whose calm and everlasting demeanor of quiet compassion had made sure that Will was always *seen* in ways that he had forgotten were necessary for the spirit of a man.

Caeso, whose loyalty knew no limits no matter how many years passed and whose constant encouragement had seen Will through his most stubborn times of innermost doubts.

Cimon, who always knew how to make Will smile regardless of circumstance and who managed, against all odds, to make light of their darkest moments in a way that never felt forced or unwelcome.

Lucas, whose brash and unforgiving demeanor did nothing to hide his protectiveness and who had bloodied more noses than one could count in defense of Will's honor; and bloodied even more blades in defense of Will's life.

Tertius, who knew beyond all the others how to simply *be* when Will needed normalcy above all other things. Who knew just when to jest, or commiserate, or simply provide a presence. Who knew when to listen.

And Hannibal.

Hannibal.

Who had seen into the deepest parts of Will from the moment they met. Who had witnessed every part of him and loved each piece as it was revealed with a devotion that Will had never felt he deserved.

Hannibal, who the very fates had driven into Will's arms like he had always been there and always would be.

Will shut his eyes and let their presence wash over him; let it drench his skin and sink into his marrow.

Six days. Six days and he might lose any one of these men. Once the march started there would be no more quiet moments like this. There would be no laughing over a tavern table. There would be no casual arguments, no more walks in the market, no more late nights lying in a bed and whispering of the future. Not until the campaign was done and they dragged the bloody remains of themselves back to their homeland.

And despite the horror of it, Will felt a relief in knowing the wait was done. He'd spent so long anticipating the possibility of loss and when it would approach him that there was serenity in the answering of the question. It would be six days. In six days they would march to whatever destiny awaited them and that would be the end of it.

Will opened his eyes and observed the men around him. He listened to their conversation. He examined their features and called to mind memories of each of them. He felt the warmth of

their closeness.

When his wandering regard settled on Hannibal, he found eyes already waiting for him. They looked upon each other and Will wondered if Hannibal was doing the same thing he was—if he was summoning the memories they shared. He wondered if Hannibal was storing away the sweep of his brow and the curve of his lips in his mind's eye.

Then Hannibal's eyes softened and Will didn't need to wonder.

They sat that way for the longest time as their companions chattered away, content to memorize each other and ignore the world.

Unfortunately, Decimus had not seen the morning's events as an excuse to flag in their training. If anything, the man was riled to an almost zealous degree and the century was soon dragged from their hideaways to toil under a hot sun for hours.

At first, Will had felt enraged by Decimus' seeming abandonment of any compassion, but as the hours dragged on and the men held fast to endurance moreso than they had done in days past, he realized that Decimus—intentional or otherwise—had done them a favor.

The tension among the ranks had been boiling and it needed a release. Vigorous training had been just what they needed for an outlet and a distraction both.

When the sun was waning and the air smelled strongly of sweat, Will looked to Decimus to find an unexpected level of understanding in his eyes and he knew then that maybe he had misjudged the man. Decimus held off until the legionaries were stumbling and their swords shaking before he called a halt to the day's proceedings and Will contemplated if anyone else realized that he had waited until the men had worn themselves out enough to bring sleep to even the most anxious minds.

Will made a stop to the baths on the way back through the city and Jove and Tertius joined him. They spent as little time as possible in the hot baths, their bodies overheated already, and settled in the cool waters of the frigidarium.

Will considered speaking on his observations of Decimus momentarily before deciding he didn't have the energy for it. "I'll miss having a bed."

"I'm sure you will," Tertius teased with great alacrity and a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Will groaned and kicked Tertius under the water. "Don't be vulgar."

Tertius flicked water at Will. "I'll miss beds too, but I'll miss not eating rations even more."

"Rations." Jove made a face and sunk deeper into the water.

I'll miss having Hannibal beside me every night, Will didn't say. *I don't know if I can sleep without him there.*

Jove shared a knowing looked with him and Will wondered franticly if he'd said the words aloud, but no one else reacted and he relaxed.

“I’ll miss good wine,” Jove said.

Tertius made a guttural sound of displeasure. “Oh gods, we’ve posca ahead of us once more.”

“Don’t forget how the rivers will tarnish our armors something terrible,” Will added.

“You know how much Lucas loves to polish.”

Will chuckled. “I’d rather not discuss Lucas’ polishing, if it’s all the same.”

They all laughed and traded barbs and complaints and lists of the things they’d miss about Antioch until their fingers pruned.

When Will finally found his way back to the auxilia, he dined quietly with Sinebetin and thought idly about the strangeness of sleeping with his fellow Romans again once they were on the campaign. He’d slept among the auxilia for so many long months that he sometimes felt more like this was his place than back in Roman encampments and he didn’t entirely believe that the feeling was entirely due to Hannibal.

Not *entirely* , anyway.

Will had often wondered about his place in the world. When he was a boy, he had felt stifled by his father’s intent insistence that he educate himself and open his mind. After his father’s death, he felt constrained by the expectations of his lot in life, doomed to be either a soldier or a servant; neither of which felt like anything worthy of a life well-lived. As a young recruit, he had felt inferior in name, in skill, and in usefulness. Healing had given him import, but he could never quite shake the feeling of being out of place and unwelcome by most.

Now, with more age and time behind him, he pondered where he stood in the world. He was too curious to be a soldier but too abrasive to be a scholar. He was too passionate for politics but far too insecure to lead in other ways. He felt the wanderlust of his father crawling under his skin and yet a deep desire for a place to call his own beating against his breastbone.

He was a man of contradictions and wondered if he would ever truly feel as though the ground were solid and steady under his feet.

His quiet musings were halted immediately when he entered Hannibal’s chambers.

Hannibal was seated at the foot of the bed, dressed in his full armor and leaning on his knees with all the circumspection and focus of a man preparing himself for something.

Immediately, Will felt himself on alert. “Hannibal? Has something happened?”

Hannibal’s eyes flicked to meet his before looking away again and the action was unsettled in a way that was so out of character that Will couldn’t think of a thing to say. He carefully walked over to Hannibal and stood in front of him, looking down at his dark hair with worry.

Hannibal clasped his fingers together and let out a laden breath. He flexed his fingers, released them, and rubbed at his knees before clasping his fingers again. His brow was furrowed in frustration.

Will shifted from one foot to another. He refrained from reaching out, even though he wanted to desperately. “I don’t know what you need. Please tell me what you need.”

Hannibal’s face contorted briefly into an expression of distress before it settled back into the mysterious agitation. He looked up at Will and searched his face. His lips worked against each other like words were threatening to escape and he was barely holding them at bay.

Deeply concerned, Will gave in to impulse and reached down to cup Hannibal’s face in his palm. Hannibal immediately leaned into the touch, but his brow didn’t unfurrow. “Hannibal, please speak to me.”

Hannibal licked his lips. “I love you, Will.” His voice was hoarse.

Eyes widening, Will stroked a thumb over Hannibal’s cheekbone. “I know that. And I love you. You know that, don’t you?” Why they were making such declarations apropos of nothing he did not understand, but he would never deny Hannibal the words if he needed them.

Hannibal’s eyes slid shut. “I do know.”

Feeling slightly insane with worry, Will brought his other hand up to hold Hannibal’s face completely. “Then I beg you, release me from whatever torment this is and tell me what thoughts have taken such a hold on you.”

Hannibal placed his hands over Will’s, holding them to his face like he could keep them there forever. With a steadying breath, he opened his eyes and held Will’s gaze with the utmost seriousness.

“Run away with me, Will.”

Chapter End Notes

Alexander Severus’ speech to the soldiers was apparently made before his trip to Antioch in 231 before the campaign into Syria in 232. As we can’t be sure he didn’t make similar speeches before they set off on their march and he was a diplomat who was likely to recycle words, I chose to use his speech here creatively, but these are the gist of the words he spoke in records about the campaign.

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